Multiculturalism in South Africa

Simon Bekker and Anne Leildé

Simon Bekker and Anne Leildé are with the Department of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch.

ABSTRACT

The nature of multicultural policy in a 'divided' South African society is addressed by the authors in two steps. First, a short constitutional and political history of transition in South Africa, over the past decade, is given. Second, since these provisions may be viewed as state attempts to construct new identities 'from above', the identities of South African citizens that appear to be emerging 'from below' are discussed.

The term multiculturalism is used either to describe cultural diversity in a society or to refer to public policy designed to create national unity in ethnic diversity. We use this term in its second, policy sense. Before starting on this task, however, we briefly describe South Africa's cultural diversity.

There are today about 45 million South Africans. Typically, they experience their society as culturally diverse. A linguistic profile reveals a mosaic of languages. No mother tongue is majoritarian. Zulu- and Xhosa-speakers form the two largest linguistic communities, and English – the only *lingua franca* linking South Africa to the globe – is used in the language repertoire of little more than half the population. A religious profile reveals similar plural patterns. Some two-thirds of South Africans attest to the Christian faith. Most of the rest affirm to African traditional beliefs while adherents to Hinduism, Islam and Judaism form significantly smaller communities. Racial consciousness inherited from colonial and *apartheid* times permeates these and other collective identities with pernicious consequences. In short, most of the standard markers of cultural diversity (or of 'multiculturalism') continually inform the everyday experiences of South Africans. The term 'multiculturalism', however, is not used in South African highbrow circles. Rather, the term 'divided' is employed, signaling more than cultural diversity. It suggests coinciding divisions along lines of inequality – a situation of ranked ethnicity – and high potential for violence, and for continued conflict in the society.

Constitutional provisions

South Africa's historical moment bringing *apartheid* to an end was shaped through a process of domestic negotiations during the early 1990s. The 1996 Constitution – the product of these negotiations – was fashioned on the field of political battle, in cross-fires produced by forces of transformation and forces of preservation, by notions of constructing new identities and of safeguarding enduring identities. Accordingly, state – civil society issues relevant to cultural diversity were very much alive in the minds of the negotiators. A number of this Constitution's key features will be identified.

Its first striking feature is that of constitutional sovereignty. Under the previous Constitution, governance was guided by parliamentary sovereignty. Today, the Constitutional Court bears this authority. When the South African state, reflecting – as it inevitably will – certain cultural interests, is called upon to be even-handed in constitutional terms, it will be the judges of this court rather than the government who will adjudicate. The second feature is the particular territorial dispersion of political power which is constituted. Intergovernmental relations between central government, nine provincial governments, and numerous local governments are required to be 'distinctive, interdependent and interrelated', thereby constituting 'co-operative government'. This division of powers establishes multiple territorial domains of representation and participation without constituting a federal arrangement. General and provincial elections to establish a national assembly and nine provincial parliaments take place under a simple list of proportional representation. Political parties, including a large number of new interest-based parties, compete openly with one another. Expressed by South African metaphor, the political playing field has been leveled.

If a constitution is interpreted as establishing a mandate between a state and its civil society, then the 1996 Constitution defines South African civil society as constituted primarily by individuals. Non-racialism and non-sexism are two of its founding provisions. Citizenship and the franchise, equality and freedom, are rights of persons, not – as in the past – of groups, or of minorities, or of races. Accordingly, cultural, linguistic, gender and religious rights of individuals are protected from unfair discrimination by the state in the Bill of Rights. The Constitution is, in this sense, classically liberal-democratic in form.

When it goes beyond protection and obliges or enables positive state action to recognize, establish or promote such rights, new cultural constituents of civil society appear within its definition. The state is obliged to take practical and

positive measures to elevate the status of indigenous languages; to constitute a state commission for the promotion and protection of the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities; to recognize the institution of traditional leadership; and to ensure that the courts apply customary law when that law is applicable. Active state intervention is enabled in two areas – affirmative action and the political role of traditional leaders.

Finally, in a section reflecting most sharply the contested nature of its establishment, the Constitution – after confirming the right of self-determination of the South African people as a whole – recognizes 'the notion of the right of self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage' within the nation. In a cultural sense, therefore, beyond the classically-liberal rights of the individual, new constituents of civil society are identified – *cultural, religious and linguistic communities,* the institution of *traditional leadership,* and *customary law.* Cultural constituents of civil society identified in earlier South African Constitutions, such as racial groups and ethnic groups, or in international law, such as minorities and "groups" as such, are conspicuously absent.

What of the process of institutionalizing these new constitutional provisions? A number of institutions – co-operative government, the National Council of Provinces, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities, the Pan South African Language Board and those defining local government roles for traditional leaders – have been established. Their track records may best be described as mixed. The large number of urban and rural local governments supposed to engage in cooperative government has recently been replaced by less than one half this number. The commissions and boards designed to address minority concerns are struggling to establish procedures and ways of carrying out decisions. A division of Traditional Affairs has been established within the Department of Constitutional Affairs. Simultaneously, though fragile and sometimes perceived to be 'toothless', these institutions are generally viewed as legitimate, at least within elite groupings. The Constitutional Court, in particular, has taken a number of decisions on religious freedom and on language. Controversy regarding affirmative action by the state persists. The case for remedial action in contemporary South Africa is strong; the fact that its consequences are and will remain contentious is apparent.

How have rank-and-file South Africans taken to these new institutional arrangements? We turn to this question in the next section.

Ordinary South Africans

Historically, the identities of South Africans have generally been described in terms of race and ethnicity. During the process of transition from *apartheid* toward a democratic state, however, new questions have emerged. Have the meanings attached to the ethnic and racial labels of the 'old' South Africa persisted? Have South Africans developed a new national identity, or are new sub-national identities emerging? Recent qualitative research reveals two major trends in identity construction 'from below': while one section of the population clearly takes pride in cultural, religious and linguistic affiliations and acknowledges recognition of such rights by the new South African state, the second section seems indifferent to such issues and appears to be drawing meaning from alternative institutions and sources of bonding.

Rank-and-file discussions on national, provincial and local matters reveal no meaningful provincial identity and weak national identity. Respondents are confused by distinctions between national, provincial and local bodies and their knowledge of their separate activities is patchy at best. What does appear as particularly meaningful at the national level is citizenship and thereby the right to stigmatize alien Africans as unwanted and illegal. Race formed an integral part of rank-and-file respondents' discussions of themselves and those around them. Nonetheless, race is rarely the primary source of meaning and indeed only becomes primary in specific circumstances: in the presence of ignorance and extended racialized socialization, in the presence of marginalization and lack of alternative sources of pride and self-esteem, and in the presence of enduring economic deprivation and of increased competition over jobs in the unskilled sector. Otherwise, it persists as one identity among many.

Minority cultural affiliation and shared meaning drawn from language, on the other hand, emerged as particularly meaningful in a number of cases. In addition, shared locality appears to provide meaning to many residents.

Minority cultural affiliation and shared meaning drawn from language, on the other hand, emerged as particularly meaningful in a number of cases. In addition, shared locality appears to provide meaning to many residents. Neighbourhood in particular provides a strong sense of community, 'a close-knit "feel"', in the words of one of the respondents. Accordingly, the main conclusion to be drawn from this research is the importance of the local to South Africans. Politicians and opinion-makers appear mesmerized by grand images – the nation, the province, the continent. South Africans draw meaning from humbler sources – village, suburb, language, minority group.

At this point in our analysis, an optimistic judgement of the South African state's policy and practice regarding ethnic and race relations would appear credible – fragile though they surely are in both word and implementation, new state-civil society institutions established by the new Constitution enable expression of diverse cultural identities among the citizenry whilst starting to build a national identity. Such a judgement, however, would be premature. The identities identified thus far are situated within that part of South African society we can describe as commercial

agricultural and urban-industrial. This section of the society comprises the state and a vibrant civil society, economic relations characterized by corporatism, and a dominant cultural ethos we may call international Anglophone. The country as a whole, however, is semi-industrialized and those addressed here comprise barely more than one half of its inhabitants. The other half – the 'underclass' – live out their lives largely outside this institutional framework. These are South Africans who speak little or no English and who live in dense informal settlements both on the peripheries of South African cities as well as in rural areas. Most importantly, these are people who hold down no fixed employment in the economy. Unemployment rates in South Africa are extremely high (in the region of 40%) and recent trends point to continuing absolute job losses in both the formal as well as the informal sectors of the economy.

Though this distinction between those living and acting within the new emergent South African civil society and those without is simplistic if understood in a rigorous sense – since kin ties, redistribution of income among relatives, and remittances within extended families all tend to blur such strict boundaries – evidence of the separation of populations and of the diminishing of such ties is available. We need therefore turn our attention to those 'without', to the South African underclass.

The South African underclass

Qualitative identity research reveals significant differences between underclass respondent groupings and other groupings. In the underclass, reference to cultural issues is rarely made and pride in cultural affiliation seems to be absent. The underclass also expresses strong local identities, but these are defined by exclusion rather than with pride. Members of this class appear to draw minimal meaning from public participation in the local sphere. Their social exclusion individualizes and marginalizes them. Their ability to complain is of little influence. These local people very rarely belong to an organized opposition movement. Though the NGO sector is well-developed in South Africa's urban areas, it is very rarely referred to in the narratives of underclass members. Their strategy, typically expressed in individual terms, is one of opting out of civil society. One way is by developing an instrumental view of criminal activity. A related strategy motivated by perceptions of police inefficiency and racial bias and aimed at defence against local criminal activity is vigilantism. Underclass organizations accordingly are local – typically micro in scale and small in numbers of members. Gangs, informal shops and vigilante groups are examples.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this rudimentary analysis. The first is that identities constructed within underclass organizations of this type remain local, and are neither racial nor ethnic. In the second place, it would be simple to categorize elite identities as reflecting trust among the citizenry in an emergent democracy and underclass identities as being 'anti-social', reflecting trust in small groups the activities of which are detrimental to the wider good of society. This, however, is too simple and possibly disingenuous a categorization since most members of the underclass appear to have little or no choice regarding their quest for a haven of survival and a badge of honour. Rather, this analysis implies that the identities members of the South African underclass are able to construct are parochial and that the institutions within which they act remain particularistic. Such constraints diminish the society's capacity to develop a democratic political culture and a vigorous civil society.

Conclusion

It would appear that multiculturalism both as a policy and an outcome has had a measure of success in the new South Africa. Minority groups demanding recognition of their identity and accommodation of their cultural differences continue to use civil society institutions to challenge the state in search of such identities and of accommodation. The new institutions of state and of corporatism have provided policies, the implementation of which have accommodated both the new and the old elite, particularly in terms of cultural differences. Neither need to mobilize rank-and-file on ethnic or racial terms. Though race and ethnicity continue to act as significant markers for South Africans, they are rarely dominant identities.

For the South African underclass, multiculturalism appears to be an issue of no consequence. The large numbers of chronically poor and unemployed act within institutions and mobilize within organizations in which identity is local rather than racial or ethnic. The minute scale of such organizations rules out mobilization on the basis of mass ethnic, linguistic or racial markers. Moreover, these local institutions and organizations offer psychological and material rewards which are experienced as independent of racial or ethnic origins. The new state and corporatist institutions that have succeeded in establishing elite accommodation fade away before they reach the arenas of these organizations.

This analysis points to a fundamental challenge facing the deeply divided society that persists in the country. The nature of elite accommodation in the society appears to exclude the underclass who, in reaction, are developing strategies of survival beyond civil society, strategies based both upon sources of local support as well as upon anti-social behaviour. In this sense, criminal violence – a common occurrence today – is a symptom of division rather than the challenge itself. The scope of multiculturalism as policy accordingly needs to embrace the underclass by offering them both material havens of survival and cultural badges of honour within emergent civil society, rather than without.

Further reading

This chapter is based upon:

BEKKER SB, LEILDE AC. 2004 'Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy in South Africa?' In Rex J & G Singh (eds.) *Governance in Multicultural Societies.* Aldershot: Ashgate

Weblink: International Journal on Multicultural Societies 5(2). http://www.unesco.org/most/jmshome.htm