

**‘God Made the White Man, God Made the Black Man...’:
Popular Racial Stereotyping of Coloured People in
Apartheid South Africa**

MOHAMED ADHIKARI
University of Cape Town

Racial identities in South Africa became ever more reified during the latter half of the twentieth century as a result of apartheid policies institutionalising these identities to an unprecedented degree. As a consequence, racial stereotyping became entrenched in public discourse and in popular culture as never before. The Coloured people of South Africa, being a racially defined and marginal minority, were particularly vulnerable to negative stereotyping within a popular mindset increasingly informed by racist and segregationist assumptions. The literature on the history of this community, however, largely fails to engage analytically with issues around the racial stereotyping of Coloured people. The earlier and more conservative works present narratives around the hoary theme of Colouredness as a product of miscegenation,¹ usually reinforcing these stereotypes. The more recent and progressive studies focus almost exclusively on Coloured protest politics and the social injustices suffered by Coloured people, generally being content with condemning such stereotyping as racist.²

1. See, for example, W.M. MacMillan, *The Cape Colour Question: A Historical Survey* (Cape Town, 1968; originally London, 1927); H.P. Cruse, *Die Opheffing van die Kleurlingbevolking: Deel I Aanvangsjare, 1652–1795* (Stellenbosch, 1947); J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652–1937* (Johannesburg, 1968; originally London, 1939); A.J. Venter, *Coloured: A Profile of Two Million South Africans* (Cape Town, 1974). Even those works sympathetic to Coloured people help sustain racial stereotyping by working within a racialised paradigm.
2. M. Hommel, *Capricorn Blues: The Struggle for Human Rights in South Africa* (Toronto, 1981); R. van der Ross, *The Rise and Decline of Apartheid: A Study of Political Movements Among the Coloured People of South Africa, 1880–1985* (Cape Town, 1986); G. Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African ‘Coloured’ Politics* (Cape Town, 1987); I. Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1987); R. du Pre, *Separate but Unequal: The ‘Coloured’ People of South Africa – A Political History* (Johannesburg, 1994). The most recent scholarly volume on the subject, Z. Erasmus, ed., *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town, 2001), breaks with this pattern in that it focuses directly on Coloured identity. It does not, however, provide a sustained narrative or consistent interpretation of the history or nature of Coloured identity and only addresses some aspects of the racial stereotyping of Coloured people in passing.

This article uses a well-known apartheid-era joke about the supposed origins of the Coloured people of South Africa to explore the racial stereotyping of this social group.³ By unravelling the attitudes and assumptions that underpin this joke, as well as several others that share the same premises, the article reveals how associations of racial hybridity, illegitimacy, marginality and residual savagery coalesced in the stereotyping of Coloured people in the popular mind. It not only demonstrates how these racist clichés about the nature of Coloured people reinforced the South African racial hierarchy and their position within it, but also provides insight into how Coloured people negotiated this racialised social terrain to forge their own identities. The article, in addition, sheds light on contestations around status within the racial order of the apartheid era, the extent to which Coloured people internalised many of the racist values of white supremacist South Africa, as well as the degree to which these attitudes have been carried over into the post-apartheid period. It, moreover, argues that jokes, especially the more enduring and widely known ones, provide an accurate indicator of the values and attitudes prevalent in the societies in which they circulate.

Coloured Identity in Historical Perspective

Contrary to international usage, in South Africa the term 'Coloured' does not refer to black people in general. It instead alludes to a phenotypically diverse group of people⁴ descended largely from Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan population and a range of other people of African and Asian origin who had been assimilated into Cape colonial society by the late nineteenth century. Being also partly descended from European settlers, Coloured people have popularly been regarded as being of 'mixed race' and have held an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the

3. In this study, stereotypes are taken to refer to consensual beliefs by ingroup members about the behaviour and nature of outgroups that serve to explain or justify existing intergroup relations. Based on highly simplified generalisations, stereotyping was initially regarded as unjustified and irrational, even pathological. Social psychologists have, however, come to recognise it as an integral part of cognition in that people need to categorise objects, events and experiences in order to make sense of their world. Thus it is generally accepted that all people stereotype to some degree, and not all stereotyping is necessarily iniquitous: see M. Banaji, 'Stereotypes, Social Psychology of', in N. Smelser and B. Baltes, eds, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 21 (Oxford, 2001), 15100–4; J. Turner and H. Giles, eds, *Intergroup Behaviour* (Oxford, 2001), 20–1; R. Jones, 'Perceiving Other People: Stereotyping as a Process of Social Cognition', in A. Miller, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Contemporary Views in Stereotyping* (New York, 1982), 41–91; D.L. Hamilton, ed., *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behaviour* (Hillsdale, 1981).
4. Kole Omotoso describes the skin colour, the most important of these phenotypical features, of Coloured people as varying 'from charcoal black to breadcrust brown, sallow yellow and finally off-white cream that wants to pass for white': *Cape Times*, 14 Jan. 2002.

numerically preponderant African population.⁵ Although the racial order of the white supremacist era has been undermined by control of the government passing to an African-dominated political party, the rise of a substantive African middle class and the discrediting of racial ideologies, the values of the old order still permeate popular perceptions and social patterns in post-apartheid South Africa.

There are approximately three and a half million Coloured people in South Africa today.⁶ Constituting no more than nine per cent of the population throughout the twentieth century and lacking significant political or economic power, Coloured people have always formed a marginal group in South African society. There has, moreover, been a marked regional concentration of Coloured people with approximately 90 per cent within the confines of the old Cape Province, two-thirds resident in the Western Cape and 30 per cent in the greater Cape Town area.⁷ The Coloured category has also generally been taken to include a number of distinct sub-groups, such as Malays, Griquas, Namas and Basters.⁸

Although Coloured identity crystallised in the late nineteenth century, the process of social amalgamation within the colonial black population at the Cape that gave rise to Coloured group consciousness dates back to the period of Dutch colonial rule. It was, however, in the decades after the emancipation of the Khoisan in 1828 and of slaves in 1838 that various components of the heterogeneous black labouring class in the Cape Colony started integrating more rapidly and developing an incipient shared identity. This identity was based on a common socio-economic status and a shared culture derived from their incorporation into the lower ranks of Cape colonial society.⁹ The emergence of a fully fledged Coloured identity as we know it today was precipitated in the late nineteenth century by the sweeping social changes that came in the wake of the mineral revolution. Not only did significant numbers of Africans start coming to the western Cape from the 1870s onwards, but assimilated colonial blacks and a wide variety of African people who had recently

5. See M. Adhikari, 'Coloureds', in C. Saunders, ed., *An Illustrated Dictionary of South African History* (Johannesburg, 1994), 77–9.
6. *The People of South Africa Population Census, 1996: Primary Tables – The Country as a Whole* (Report No. 03–01–19), 6; *Statistics South Africa, 2000* (Pretoria, Government Publications Dept., 2001), 1.1.
7. Compare statistics in *Census of the Union of South Africa, 1911* (UG 32–1912), Annexure 1, 7–11 with *South African Census, 1996*, 6.
8. The term 'Cape Coloured' is usually used to distinguish Coloured people from the broader category that includes these sub-groups. For further discussion on the relationship between these sub-groups and Coloured identity, see M. Adhikari, 'Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910–1994' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2002), 35–6.
9. M. Adhikari, 'The Sons of Ham: Slavery and the Making of Coloured Identity', *South African Historical Journal*, 27 (1992), 107–8; N. Worden, 'Adjusting to Emancipation: Freed Slaves and Farmers in Mid-Nineteenth Century Southwestern Cape', in W. James and M. Simons, eds, *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape* (Cape Town, 1989), 33–4; P. Scully, 'The Bouquet of Freedom: Social and Economic Relations in the Stellenbosch District, 1870–1900' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987), 11–12.

been incorporated into the capitalist economy were thrust together in the highly competitive environment of the newly established mining towns.¹⁰ These developments drove acculturated colonial blacks to assert a separate identity in order to claim a position of relative privilege to Africans on the basis of their closer assimilation to Western culture and being partly descended from European colonists.¹¹

Because of their marginality and the determination with which the state implemented white supremacist policies, the story of Coloured political organisation during the period of white rule has largely been one of compromise, retreat and failure. The most consistent feature of Coloured political history until the latter phases of apartheid has been the continual erosion of the civil rights first bestowed upon blacks in the Cape Colony by the British administration in the mid-nineteenth century. The process of attrition started with the franchise restrictions imposed by the Parliamentary Registration Act of 1887 and the Franchise and Ballot Act of 1892.¹² A spate of segregationist measures in the first decade of the twentieth century further compromised the civil rights of Coloured people.¹³ In the 1920s and 1930s, the economic advancement of the Coloured community was undermined by the Pact Government's civilised labour policy¹⁴ and a number of laws designed to favour whites over blacks in the competition for employment.¹⁵ Furthermore, in

10. Adhikari, 'Sons of Ham', 110; W. Worger, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: Mineworkers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867-1895* (New Haven, 1987), ch. 2; R. Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871-1890* (Cambridge, 1987), 29-31, 94-104; V. Bickford-Smith, 'Commerce, Class and Ethnicity in Cape Town, 1875-1902' (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1988), 102-3, 185-8.
11. For a more detailed discussion of the origins of Coloured identity, see M. Adhikari, *Let Us Live for Our Children: The Teachers' League of South Africa, 1913-1940* (Cape Town, 1993), 11-18 and Adhikari, 'Sons of Ham', 95-112. For case studies of the process in Cape Town and Kimberley respectively, see V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town, 1875-1902* (Cambridge, 1995), 186-209 and P. Lawrence, 'Class, Colour Consciousness and the Search for Identity at the Kimberley Diamond Diggings, 1867-1893' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1994).
12. S. Trapido, "'The Friends of the Natives': Merchants, Peasants and the Political and Ideological Structure of Liberalism in the Cape', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 266.
13. The most significant were the exclusion of Coloured people from the franchise in the former Boer republics after the Anglo-Boer War, the promulgation of the School Board Act of 1905 that segregated the Cape's education system by providing compulsory public schooling for white children only, and the denial of the right of Coloured people to be elected to parliament with the implementation of Union in 1910: Van der Ross, *Rise and Decline of Apartheid*, 43-55; Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 30-9, 46-63.
14. This policy sought to ameliorate the poor white problem by absorbing newly urbanised whites into industrial occupations and replacing black workers with whites at wages that ensured a 'civilised' standard of living: see T.R.H. Davenport and C. Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History* (London, 2000), 636-7.
15. For example, the 1921 Juvenile Affairs Act set up mechanisms for the placement of white school leavers into suitable employment. Also, the Apprenticeship Act of 1922 put apprenticeships beyond the reach of most Coloured youths by stipulating educational entry levels that very few Coloured schools met but that fell within the minimum educational standard set for white

1930 the influence of the Coloured vote was more than halved by the enfranchisement of white women only.¹⁶ It was during the apartheid era, however, that Coloured people suffered the most severe violations of their civil rights. Their forced classification under the Population Registration Act of 1950 made the implementation of rigid segregation possible. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 respectively outlawed marriage and sex across the colour line. Under the Group Areas Act of 1950, well over half a million Coloured people were forcibly relocated to residential and business areas usually on the periphery of cities and towns. The 1953 Separate Amenities Act, which introduced 'petty apartheid' by segregating virtually all public facilities, also created deep resentment. After a protracted legal and constitutional battle, the National Party in 1956, moreover, succeeded in removing Coloured people from the common voter's roll.¹⁷

Because their primary objective was to assimilate into the dominant society, Coloured leaders initially avoided forming separate political organisations. Intensifying segregationism in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War, however, forced them to mobilise politically in defence of their rights. Although the earliest Coloured political organisations date back to the 1880s, the first substantive Coloured political body, the African Political Organisation (APO), was established in Cape Town in 1902.¹⁸ Under the leadership of the charismatic Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman, who served as president from 1905 till his death in 1940, the APO dominated Coloured protest politics for nearly four decades. It became the main vehicle for expressing this community's assimilationist aspirations, as well as its fears at the rising tide of segregationism, until its demise in the mid 1940s.¹⁹

schools. The 1925 Wage Act subverted the ability of Coloured labour to undercut white wage demands by setting high minimum wage levels in key industries. See Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 131–3, 161–3; S. Patterson, *Colour and Culture in South Africa: A Study of the Status of Cape Coloured People of the Union of South Africa* (London, 1953), 71–2; G.V. Doxey, *The Industrial Colour Bar in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1961), 198–9; W.H. Hutt, *The Economics of the Colour Bar: A Study of the Economic Origins and Consequences of Racial Segregation in South Africa* (London, 1964), 35–6, 74–5.

16. L. Thompson, *The Cape Coloured Franchise* (Johannesburg, 1949) 20–1, 55; G. Lewis, 'The Reaction of the Cape "Coloureds" to Segregation' (PhD thesis, Queens University, 1984), 330–1; T. Shifrin, 'New Deal for Coloured People? A Study of National Party Policies towards the Coloured People' (BA Hons thesis, University of Cape Town, 1962), 20–3.
17. Van der Ross, *Rise and Decline of Apartheid*, ch. 16; Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 261–2, 267–70; Du Pre, *Separate but Unequal*, chs. 4–8; V. Bickford-Smith, E. van Heyningen and N. Worden, *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century: An Illustrated Social History* (Cape Town, 1999), 143–96.
18. Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 10–25; Van der Ross, *Rise and Decline of Apartheid*, 1–30.
19. A number of ephemeral political organisations such as the United Afrikaner League of the late 1910s and the Afrikaanse Nasionale Bond (ANB) of the latter half of the 1920s – bodies that were promoted by Cape National Party politicians hoping to win Coloured electoral support – failed to subvert the dominance of the APO: M. Adhikari, 'Abdullah Abdurahman, 1872–1940' in *They Shaped Our Century: The Most Influential South Africans of the Twentieth Century* (Cape Town, 1999), 438; Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 124–6, 128–33, 250–6.

Intensifying segregation and the failure of the APO's moderate approach contributed to the emergence of a radical movement inspired by Marxist ideology within the better-educated, urbanised sector of the Coloured community during the 1930s. The National Liberation League (NLL), founded in 1935, and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), established in 1943, were the most important of the radical organisations. Prone to fissure and unable to bridge the racial divisions within the society, the radical movement failed in its quest to unite blacks in the struggle against segregation.²⁰ The South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO),²¹ which was founded in 1953 and affiliated to the ANC-led Congress Alliance, also organised protests and demonstrations, especially against the removal of Coloured people from the voter's roll.²² Organised opposition to apartheid from within the Coloured community was, however, effectively quelled by state repression following the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and only re-emerged in the wake of the Soweto uprising of 1976. A few poorly supported political organisations, such as the Labour Party of South Africa and the Federal Coloured People's Party, which were prepared to work within apartheid structures, were, however, sanctioned during the heyday of apartheid.²³

From the latter half of the 1970s onwards, starting with the popularisation of Black Consciousness ideology, the nature of Coloured identity became an extremely contentious issue as increasing numbers of educated and politicised people who had been classified 'Coloured' under the Population Registration Act rejected the identity.²⁴ Colouredness increasingly came to be viewed as an artificial categorisation imposed on the society by the ruling minority as part of its divide-and-rule strategies. The growth of a mass, non-racial, democratic movement in the 1980s, that burgeoned under the leadership of the United Democratic Front, founded in 1983, as well as controversy over the participation of some Coloured leaders in the tricameral Parliament of the P.W. Botha government from 1984 onwards, fed Coloured rejectionist sentiment. With the western Cape an epicentre of resistance to apartheid, the nature of Coloured identity became a highly charged

20. Hommel, *Capricorn Blues*, 65 ff.; Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 179–98, 207–44; van der Ross, *Rise and Decline of Apartheid*, 209 ff.; A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot, 2000), 266–70.
21. SACPO was renamed the Coloured People's Congress (CPC) in December 1959.
22. Lewis, *Between the Wire and Wall*, 263–71; Hommel, *Capricorn Blues*, 135–42, 157–9.
23. For a history of the Labour Party and information on other Coloured political parties that served on the Coloured Representative Council (CRC), see R. du Pre, 'Confrontation, Co-Optation and Collaboration: The Response and Reaction of the Labour Party to Government Policy, 1965–1984' (PhD thesis, Rhodes University, 1994); and for a collection of relevant documents, see P. Hugo, *Quislings or Realists? A Documentary Study of 'Coloured' Politics in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1978), chs. 4 and 5.
24. The role of Coloured people in the Black Consciousness movement and its history in the western Cape, neglected topics in South African historiography, are discussed in E. Messina, 'Kleurlinge is ook Swart: Swartbewustheid in die Wes-Kaap tot 1977', *Kronos*, 20 (1995), 115–40. See also M. Adhikari, 'From Manenberg to Soweto: Race and Coloured Identity in the Black Consciousness Poetry of James Matthews', *African Studies*, 62, 2 (Dec. 2003), 171–86.

issue within the anti-apartheid movement, and any recognition of Coloured identity was repudiated as a concession to apartheid thinking.²⁵

In spite of this, the salience of Coloured identity has endured. During the four-year transition to democratic rule under president F.W. de Klerk, political parties across the ideological spectrum made ever more strident appeals to Coloured identity for support. Not only did it once again become politically acceptable to espouse a Coloured identity, but post-apartheid South Africa has also witnessed a rapid retreat of Coloured rejectionism and a concomitant Coloured assertiveness. This has been due partly to a desire to project a positive self-image in the face of the pervasive negative racial stereotyping of Coloured people and partly as a result of attempts at ethnic mobilisation to take advantage of the newly democratic political environment. The December 1st Movement of the late 1990s and the various Khoisan revivalist movements of the new South Africa are among the more prominent manifestations of these developments.²⁶ The resurgence of Colouredism has, moreover, to a significant extent been due to fear of African majority rule and a perception that, as in the old order, Coloureds were once again being marginalised. A common refrain amongst disaffected Coloured people has been: 'First we were not white enough and now we are not black enough.' Though far from allayed, these fears have in recent years been alleviated by the fading influence of the National Party and its '*swart gevaar*' (black peril) tactics and by the acclimatisation of people to the new political order.²⁷

God, Jan van Riebeeck and the Coloured People

The joke around which this article is built hinges on the audience's awareness of the status of Jan van Riebeeck, the commander of the first Dutch settlement established at the Cape in 1652, as the 'founding father' of white South Africa. One of the most basic 'facts' drummed into children in school history lessons in apartheid South Africa was that Van Riebeeck's landing marked the start of South

25. For a discussion of attitudes toward Coloured identity in the anti-apartheid movement, see M. Adhikari, "'You have the Right to Know": *South, 1987–1994*' in L. Switzer and M. Adhikari, eds, *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid* (Athens, 2000), 349–54.
26. For a discussion of Khoisan revivalism, see M. Besten, 'Khoisan Revivalism and the Limits of Theory: A Preliminary Assessment' (Seminar Paper, Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, 2000) and M. Besten, 'Kho-San identity in South Africa' (Paper, African Studies Library, University of Cape Town, 2005). For information on the December 1st Movement which sought to develop a sense of pride about their slave past among Coloured people, consult Anon., 'December 1st Movement: Retracing the Path of Memory' (unpublished manuscript, African Studies Library, University of Cape Town, 1996).
27. Aspects of Coloured identity in the new South Africa are dealt with in W. James, D. Caliguire and K. Cullinan, eds, *Now that We are Free: Coloured Communities in a Democratic South Africa* (Boulder, 1996) and Erasmus, *Coloured by History*.

African history proper and of civilised life in the sub-continent.²⁸ Elaborate state-sponsored celebrations of the tercentenary of his arrival at the Cape to establish a victualling station for the Dutch East India Company ensured Van Riebeeck a prominent place in apartheid propaganda from the early days of National Party rule.²⁹ Van Riebeeck became even more ubiquitous as an icon of white supremacy after his image appeared on the obverse side of the currency after South Africa became a republic in 1961. Van Riebeeck was thus an important element in the myth-making and ideological manipulation used to justify apartheid ideology and practices.

The joke begins by describing a scenario which provokes a Coloured person into hurling racial insults at an African and repudiating him as an inferior being. A typical setting for the joke would be an apartheid-era situation, in which an African person tries to gain entrance to some facility such as a cinema or public conveyance reserved for Coloured people. In a fashion all too familiar with the apartheid experience, the Coloured protagonist would expel the African from the facility and end off the racist diatribe by exclaiming 'No Kaffirs are allowed here!'³⁰ The African then counters this tirade with the punchline that 'God made the white man, God made the black man, God made the Indian, the Chinese and the Jew – but Jan van Riebeeck, he made the Coloured man.'³¹

This joke, which has taken on a variety of forms, became a well-established means of teasing or deriding Coloured people and the premises upon which it is based are understood over a broad spectrum of South African society. Although typical of the apartheid era, the assumptions, images and values that underlie the joke would nevertheless have resonated with South African audiences from all walks of life from at least the late nineteenth century onwards. In my experience it was a very common joke often openly told to, and by, Coloured people during the apartheid period. While never acceptable in politically progressive circles, the arrival of the 'new' South Africa, with its heightened sensitivity to anything that might be deemed racially offensive, has led to the joke losing much of its appeal and, where still in evidence, is mainly restricted to private discourse among people who share a high degree of personal trust.³²

28. See L. Witz, 'Beyond van Riebeeck' in S. Nuttal and C. Michael, *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford, 2000), 318–43 for a study of the ways in which Van Riebeeck was presented in school history texts.
29. See L. Witz, 'Commemorations and Conflicts in the Production of South African National Pasts: The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1997).
30. 'Kaffir' is a highly offensive mode of address or reference to an African person which has in recent times become an actionable insult.
31. While I can never recall having seen it in print, I have heard this joke told on countless occasions from the early 1960s onwards.
32. If audience reactions to crassly racist jokes on 'Comedy Showcase', a nationally televised programme featuring stand-up comedians is anything to go by, there is still a high degree of public tolerance of this brand of humour. In more recent broadcasts jokes about the alleged *penchant of Coloured people for criminal behaviour drew roars of laughter from racially mixed audiences that included many Coloured people: Comedy Showcase, 22 June 2003; 8 Nov. 2003.*

The Van Riebeeck joke harnesses several key features of the racial stereotyping of Coloured people in apartheid South Africa and, indeed, reveals much about the popular concept of Colouredness. The punchline only makes sense if teller and audience share particular assumptions about Coloured people or, at the very least, acknowledge the existence of a popular image of Coloured people that embodies these characteristics. That a local entrepreneur, who in the late 1980s arranged tours of Cape Town's black townships aimed primarily at foreign visitors, began the trip with a version of this joke 'about old Jan van Riebeeck and his comrades frolicking with the local maidens ... giving birth to the "colourful folk"'³³ is an indication that these assumptions were sufficiently widely shared even for foreigners to be able to 'catch the joke'.

The exchange of insults between the Coloured and African protagonists in the Van Riebeeck joke is set within the context of the racial hierarchy of white-supremacist South Africa. The conventional perception of this racial stratification had the ruling white minority on top, the African majority at the bottom and the Coloured people in-between. It is apparent from the treatment of the African protagonist that the Coloured person in the joke shares this perception of the social order. In terms of the value system in which the joke operates, Coloured people are accorded a superior status to Africans within the racial hierarchy because they can claim to be partly descended from whites and more closely assimilated to Western bourgeois culture.³⁴ As the riposte from the African demonstrates, however, the conventional perception of the social order was open to challenge. Although the punchline does not necessarily question the dominant status of whites, the African rejects the relatively privileged status of Coloureds by asserting that racial purity trumps genetic proximity to whiteness or assimilation to Western culture.³⁵

33. *Cape Argus*, 5 Nov. 1988. The substitution of 'colourful folk' for Coloured people is a pointed reference to the stereotype of working-class Coloured people as happy-go-lucky, 'colourful' people: see Z. Wicomb, 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa', in D. Attridge and R. Jolly, eds, *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge, 1998), 96; Erasmus, 'Introduction', *Coloured by History*, 14, 20. Even whites highly sympathetic to Coloured people often stereotype them in this way. For example, economist and outspoken critic of segregationism, Professor W.H. Hutt, described Coloured people as a 'race of half-castes (which) constitutes the most unjustly treated, the most cheerful and the most lovable group of people I have ever known': Hutt, *Colour Bar*, 15.
34. For further discussion of the nature of Coloured identity and the way in which it functioned as a social identity, see Adhikari, 'Continuity and Change', 24-44; M. Adhikari, "'A Drink-Sodden Race of Bestial Degenerates": Attitudes toward Race and Class in the *Educational Journal*, 1913-1940', in E. van Heyningen, ed., *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 7 (Cape Town, 1994), 109-31.
35. Ironically the phenomenon of Africans passing for Coloured was relatively common. As 'Coloured' writer Chris van Wyk commented of African families who surreptitiously moved into the Johannesburg Coloured township of Riverlea, 'Morewa ... becomes Moore ... the Ndlovus become Oliphants ... the Setlares become Grootbooms ... the McBaines used to be Magubane and the Masekelas are going around as Maskells': C. van Wyk, *Shirley. Goodness and Mercy: A Childhood Memoir* (Johannesburg, 2004), 174-5. The word Coloured is placed in quotation marks when referring to people who were classified as such under apartheid laws or who are

The punchline of the Van Riebeeck joke invokes the most salient characteristic associated with Colouredness in the popular mind, namely, that of racial hybridity. Through hybridity, the closely allied attributes of racial inferiority and illegitimacy are also assigned to Coloured people as a group. The joke turns upon a shared perception between teller and audience of the pejorative nature of racial hybridity and illegitimate conception. Without these associations, the joke would hardly be considered funny.

The attribute of racial hybridity is virtually inherent to the concept of Colouredness in the popular mind and is the most prominent in the array of negative qualities associated with it. Coloured people are generally thought of as being of 'mixed race', or less flatteringly, as 'half-caste' or even a 'bastard' people. Indeed, before the exclusive meaning of the term Coloured became current in the mid 1880s, words such as 'bastard' and 'half-caste' were the most common epithets used to refer to this social group or to individual members.³⁶ In other words, Colouredness is seen as the product of miscegenation, and racial mixture to be its defining characteristic. The idea of racial hybridity has been so intrinsic to the concept of Colouredness that even an ultra-left wing Coloured intellectual such as Kenneth Jordaan, a leading member of the Trotskyist Fourth International Organisation of South Africa, writing in 1952, accepted that Jan van Riebeeck was the 'father of the Cape Coloured people'.³⁷ The *Torch*, the mouthpiece of the Non-European Unity Movement, the most prominent of the Marxist liberatory organisations to gain support within the Coloured community, also accepted that the Coloured people 'arose as a result of the glandular carelessness of Van Riebeeck and his men'.³⁸ For evidence that the perception of Colouredness as the automatic product of miscegenation has survived into the 'new' South Africa among people regarded as politically progressive, one could point to Tokyo Sexwale, former Gauteng premier who is married to a white woman, describing his children as Coloured³⁹ and novelist Achmat Dangor declaring: 'In my own case, I'm so bastardised I can only call myself Coloured.'⁴⁰

If racial hybridity is the defining attribute associated with Colouredness in the popular mind, then the idea that Colouredness is an inherent racial condition that results automatically from miscegenation between black and white people is the

generally accepted as Coloured, but who either reject the identity or question its conventional meaning.

36. In the context of southern African history, the inclusive meaning of the word 'Coloured' refers to all black people and in its exclusive meaning refers to people of mixed racial origin only. My as yet unpublished research into the usage of the term indicates that it was used in both senses in the latter part of the nineteenth century at the Cape. There was a marked shift in favour of the exclusive meaning in the latter half of the 1880s, indicating that Coloured identity in its modern form had crystallised in the period immediately prior to this.
37. K. Jordaan, 'Jan van Riebeeck: His Place in South African History', *Discussion*, 1, 5 (1952), 34.
38. *Torch*, 3 Mar. 1947.
39. *Mail and Guardian*, 2 July 1999.
40. *Mail and Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2001.

fundamental misconception associated with the identity. In popular thinking, Colouredness is not treated as a social identity but tends to be reified into a cluster of innate qualities that spontaneously and inexorably are assumed to manifest themselves in the offspring of black-white sexual intercourse. As with another version of this joke, which dates the genesis of the Coloured people at nine months after the landing of Van Riebeeck's party,⁴¹ the popular mind looks back to primal acts of inter-racial sex rather than processes of social interaction and identity formation in nineteenth-century southern African society for the making of Coloured identity. Thus, no matter how 'respectable' a Coloured person may have become or what their level of personal achievement, the taint of that original sin has persisted in racial thinking that remains entrenched in broader South African society.

Indeed, the risqué element of the Van Riebeeck joke is derived from the image of the Coloured people having been conceived through illicit sexual intercourse immediately upon the landing of the first Dutch colonists. Implicit in most peoples' understanding of the joke is what 'Coloured' novelist Zoe Wicomb refers to as 'the nasty, unspoken question of concupiscence that haunts coloured identity'.⁴² This racially attributed trait is not nearly as unmentionable as Wicomb's comment might suggest, except perhaps in genteel company, particularly within 'respectable' sectors of the Coloured community itself, as the widely recognised stereotype of the *goffel* confirms. *Goffel* is a highly pejorative term that generally refers to working-class Coloured women and characterises them as socially inferior, usually physically unattractive but sexually available.⁴³ Zimitri Erasmus, a 'Coloured' sociologist, confirms that, for her, 'being Coloured is about living an identity that is clouded in sexualised shame'.⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that, for most listeners, the Van Riebeeck joke is enhanced by tacit assumptions about Coloured female lasciviousness and sexual availability.⁴⁵

41. Du Pre also refers to this joke: Du Pre, *Separate but Unequal*, viii.

42. Wicomb, 'Shame and Identity', 93.

43. There appears to be no academic writing on the *goffel* stereotype and dictionaries and reference works generally fail to mention the term. My own experience and initial investigations, however, indicate that the term has currency over a broad spectrum of South African society and is commonly used in the rest of southern Africa, especially Zimbabwe. As P. Silva, (managing ed.), *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*, (Oxford, 1996), 257–8 attests, the term is also used, by extension, to refer to Coloured people generally. J. Branford and W. Branford, *A Dictionary of South African English* (Cape Town, 1991), 107 is misinformed to suggest that the term refers only to Coloured prostitutes.

44. Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 14.

45. A distinction needs to be drawn between the supposed concupiscence of Coloured women and their sexual availability, because in my understanding of the sexual stereotyping of Coloured women, their willingness to have sex with white men was not seen merely to be due to their prurience. It is also a matter of power in that white men were often, or assumed themselves to be, in a position to demand sex from Coloured women, over whom they wielded some degree of authority. In South Africa there has also been an abiding belief that whites are physically more attractive than black people and thus highly desirable as sexual partners, if available. As one working-class white man once said to me, while boasting about the ease with which he was able

Throughout Western society, and probably more so in South Africa, racial hybridity has carried a heavy stigma, with ideas of miscegenation and 'mixed blood' conjuring up for most people a host of repugnant connotations. Negative attitudes toward 'hybridisation' as opposed to 'purity of breed' are well entrenched in modern popular culture, whether applied to livestock, household pets or humans.⁴⁶ Writing at the end of the 1930s, J.S. Marais observed that this 'philosophy of blood and race ... leads to a passionate aversion to miscegenation ... which is the primary article of faith of the South African nation'.⁴⁷ In South Africa these attitudes came to find concrete expression in the notorious Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts.⁴⁸ This kind of prejudice was still very much in evidence in the latter phases of white rule. Take, for example, the way Maria van Niekerk, a conservative white South African woman, expressed her horror at the repeal of the Mixed Marriages Act in 1985. Van Niekerk claimed that she 'did not stand for bastardising our land' and that she wanted South Africa 'to be pure white, pure Indian, pure blacks [*sic*] and the Coloureds must be proud of what they are now'.⁴⁹ This repugnance is a product of the commonly held belief that miscegenation of necessity pollutes the resulting offspring and renders them inferior. While arch-conservative Andries Treurnicht's claim that 'Coloureds are our 12-year-old children and must remain under our guardianship'⁵⁰ is at the extreme end of the spectrum of racist opinion, there was general acceptance among whites that Coloured people were intellectually and morally inferior to varying degrees as a result of their miscegenated origins.⁵¹

As the Van Riebeeck joke illustrates, Africans broadly shared these negative perceptions of racial hybridity and therefore of Coloured people. The Xhosa-derived vernacular Afrikaans colloquialism '*malau*', a pejorative reference to Coloured people signifying that they lack cultural or racial integrity and are thus

to 'pick up *goffels*': 'We are like Elvis to them.'

46. See, for example, J. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge, 1982), 195–6; S. Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1995), 180–1; R. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London, 1995), especially 100–18; C. Hendricks, "'Ominous" Liaisons', in Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 41; T. Reddy, 'The Politics of Naming: The Constitution of Coloured Subjects in South Africa', in Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 71–2.
47. Marais, *Cape Coloured People*, 282.
48. Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, No. 55 of 1949 and the Immorality Amendment Act, No. 21 of 1950. The latter extended the ban on sexual intercourse between whites and Africans, introduced by the Immorality Act of 1927, to all black people.
49. J. Gordon, *Under the Harrow: Lives of White South Africans Today*, (London, 1988), 171.
50. Undated quote from J. Crwys-Williams, *The Penguin Dictionary of South African Quotations* (Sandton, 1999), 83.
51. For further elaboration on this topic, see Young, *Colonial Desire*, especially ch. 6; J.M. Coetzee, 'Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration: The Novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin', in *White Writing: On the Culture and Letters of South Africa* (Sandton, 1988), 136–62; Erasmus, 'Introduction', *Coloured by History*, 17.

rootless and uncouth, is a clear indication of this.⁵² Sol Plaatje, in a telling if exaggerated example, gave expression to these negative perceptions of racial hybridity among Africans in his novel *Mhudi*, written in 1919–20 and generally accepted as the first South African novel in English by an African writer. In a speech to rally the defeated and dispirited Ndebele people, Mzilikazi is made to denounce the alliance between Bechuana and Boer ranged against him. He predicted that after betraying and subjugating the Bechuana the Boers ‘shall take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race half man and half goblin, and ... these Bechuana will waste away in helpless fury till the gnome offspring of such miscegenation rise up against their cruel sires’.⁵³ The poignant contemporary story of Thuli Nhlapo who endured a life of ridicule and rejection by both her family and community who taunted her as ‘*boesman*’ and ‘this yellow thing’ because she was the ‘love child’ of an African mother and white father provides intimate insight into the torment that can result from the odium that is often attached to racial hybridity in African society.⁵⁴

Coloured people have all along been painfully aware of African racial prejudice toward them. The frequent self-deprecatory use of ‘*malau*’, especially among working-class Coloured people, is evidence of this. Roy du Pre, a ‘Coloured’ academic, sums up a common attitude among Africans towards Coloured people: ‘... Africans despise Coloured people in general. They ... (look) upon them as “mixed-breeds” with no nationhood, no identity, no land, no culture. The African on the other hand, is a proud, full-blooded, “pure-breed” with a history, culture and identity going back centuries.’⁵⁵ Some have even internalised these negative judgements. For instance, in Jonny Steinberg’s biography of a

52. *Malau* is derived from the Xhosa *amalawu* or *ilawu* which is usually defined as ‘Hottentot’ in Xhosa dictionaries. M. Wilson and A. Mafeje, *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township* (London, 1963), 13, explains that *malau* refers to Coloured people and is generally taken to signify ‘a rogue, someone without customs and tradition ... (and) who drinks excessively’. Gerald Stone’s knowledgeable and nuanced study ‘An Ethnographic and Socio-Semantic Analysis of Lexis among Working-Class, Afrikaans-Speaking, Coloured Adolescents and Young Adult Males in the Cape Peninsula, 1963–1990’ (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1991), 354, interprets the term as referring to people who are ‘acultural, bastardised and authentic in neither blackness or whiteness’. See also Z. Erasmus, ‘Some Kind of White, Some Kind of Black: Living the Moments of Entanglement in South Africa and its Academy’, in B. Hesse, *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions* (London, 2000), 203. I would like to thank Gerald Stone for sharing with me his knowledge on this and other aspects of Cape vernacular Afrikaans.

53. S. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (Cape Town, 1996), 147. It should be noted, however, that it is quite difficult to read Plaatje’s attitude from Mzilikazi’s speech alone, since the latter is the villain of *Mhudi*, portrayed in the novel by its author as a ‘usurper’ responsible for extensive destruction and misery.

54. *Mail and Guardian*, 17 Nov. 2000.

55. Du Pre, *Separate but Unequal*, 225. For an evocation of Coloured-African racial tension on the Witwatersrand towards the end of apartheid, see D. Mattera, ‘Die Bushie is Dood ...’, in R. Malan, (comp.), *Being Here: Modern Short Stories from Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1994), 138–42.

prison gang leader, *The Number*, he notes that many veteran, Coloured prison gangsters regard themselves as having ‘tarnished the legacy of Nongoloza’, the founder of the 28 prison gang because ‘they have neither the depth nor the maturity to preserve the heritage bequeathed to them’. One gangster explained: ‘My people are ill-disciplined because we are mixed, because we have no past. We do not have things like clan loyalty.’ Another added: ‘The Zulus have their king Shaka ... the Swazis have their king. The Afrikaners have Jan van Riebeeck. What do we have? We don’t even have our own language.’⁵⁶

In keeping with the Social Darwinist and Eugenist assumptions that have thoroughly permeated South African racial thinking at the popular level, it has generally been assumed that miscegenation breeds weakness, as there is a tendency for the progeny of racially mixed sexual unions to exhibit the combined, or even exaggerated, weaknesses of their progenitors, and for the positive qualities to be diluted or lost altogether.⁵⁷ Indeed, many of the racial traits attributed to Coloured people have often been explained in terms of the deleterious effects of racial mixture. Allegedly inherent characteristics of Coloured people, such as their being physically stunted, lacking in endurance and being naturally prone to dishonesty, licentiousness and drink, have often been explained or justified in terms of the effects of racial mixture or of ‘*gebastenheid*’ (bastardisation) resulting in physical and moral weakness.⁵⁸ In my experience it was not uncommon to find both serious and tongue-in-cheek explanations of the sort that Coloured people are morally weak, confused and vacillating by nature because their white ‘blood’ pulls them in one direction and their black ‘blood’ pulls them in another.⁵⁹

Popular assumptions about the racial hybridity of the Coloured community are based upon the premise that miscegenation gives rise to offspring that are related but nevertheless racially distinct from their parents.⁶⁰ In this way, sexual relations between European male settlers on the one hand and Khoi and slave women on the other from the very start of Dutch colonisation were pictured as having given birth to a distinct racial entity, the Coloured people. This much is apparent from the way the joke employs Jan van Riebeeck as the symbolic father

56. J. Steinberg, *The Number: One Man’s Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (Johannesburg, 2004), 260.

57. Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 128–9, 180–9.

58. In my personal recollections, which dates back to the late 1950s, these perceptions of Coloured people were very common among Indian and white people, and were sometimes shared by middle-class Coloureds as well: for further discussion on these issues, see Hendricks, ‘“Ominous” Liaisons’, 41 and D. Lewis, ‘Writing Hybrid Selves: Richard Rive and Zoë Wicomb’, in Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 133.

59. An example of this perception expressed as a joke, told to me by an African student in 2002, has the white man stirring his tea in a clockwise direction, the African in an anti-clockwise direction while the Coloured man stirred his tea in an erratic, haphazard way because he was *deurmekaar* (confused). For an example of this sort of thinking applied to the Khoisan, see Cruse, *Opheffing van die Kleurlingbevolking*, 36.

60. I have, on occasion, heard such children jokingly referred to as ‘zebras’, that is, having black and white stripes.

of the Coloured people, and the alternative version of the joke dates the origin of the Coloured people at nine months after the landing of Van Riebeeck.⁶¹ The common characterisation of Coloured people as ‘mixed race’ – which presupposes the prior existence of ‘pure races’ and their ‘mixture’ to be unnatural and undesirable, even pathological – demonstrates an unreflective popular acceptance of Coloured people as both different and inferior.⁶²

In popular thinking and in a great deal of academic writing as well,⁶³ there is very little, if any, recognition of the necessary historical reality that Coloured identity arose as a result of social change and human agency rather than simply being an automatic product of miscegenation. Indeed, the assertion of a separate Coloured identity in the late nineteenth century proved to be a highly successful strategy precisely because it utilised those very ideas and assumptions of racial difference and hybridity upon which the doctrine of white supremacy rested. The key assumption in this respect was that humanity consisted of a hierarchy of races in which status was determined by the degree to which a particular group conformed to the somatic and cultural norms of Western Europe.⁶⁴ Being able to assert partial descent from European settlers was thus essential to Coloureds justifying and receiving favoured treatment relative to Africans.

But their claim to kinship with whites was a double-edged sword for the Coloured community. Although it allowed them to argue for a status of relative privilege, it also meant accepting racial hybridity as an integral part of their being. For the white establishment there was of course no question that such kinship could be the basis for a claim to equality. For some, however, kinship underpinned attitudes of paternalism. For example, former rugby hero turned progressive farmer in the 1980s, Jan Boland Coetzee, was of the opinion that his ‘Coloured labourers were like children ... didn’t know what was good for them, only wanted their daily *dop* (tot) of wine’.⁶⁵ But when asked whether Afrikaners were different to

61. For evidence that Jan van Riebeeck was generally accepted as their symbolic father within the Coloured community itself, see Jordaan, ‘Jan van Riebeeck’, 34; C. Ziervogel, *Brown South Africa* (Cape Town, 1938), 6; Hommel, *Capricorn Blues*, 10; S. Field, ‘Remembering Experience, Interpreting Memory: Life Stories from Windermere’, *African Studies*, 60, 1 (July 2001), 122.

62. For a discussion of meanings and subtexts to the term ‘mixed race’ as applied to intimate relationships between Coloured and African people, see K. Ratele, ‘“Mixed” Relations’, in K. Ratele and N. Duncan, eds, *Social Psychology: Identities and Relationships* (Cape Town, 2003), 241–65.

63. For a detailed discussion of this issue with regard to writing on the history of the Coloured people, see Adhikari, ‘Continuity and Change’, 63–120.

64. See, for example, G. Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London, 1999), especially chs. 5–7; J. Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, 1992) 47–9; N. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (London, 1982), especially ch. 3; Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 67–74.

65. A weakness for wine is one of the most common aspects of the racial stereotyping of Coloured people as demonstrated by the popular joke: What is the Coloured peoples’ contribution to philosophy? ‘I drink therefore I am!’ A similar apartheid-era joke was to pose the question ‘As

Coloureds he replied, 'we made them', evading the question but acknowledging paternity as well as a degree of responsibility toward Coloured people.⁶⁶ For others, the claim to kinship was embarrassing, even threatening, as demonstrated by the story of Mrs. C.S., who was born on a farm in Swellendam in 1922 and came to live in a Windermere squatter camp on the outskirts of Cape Town in 1950. Employed on a white-owned farm as a young girl, she rejected the farmer and his wife's claim that Coloureds were different and inferior to whites. Resorting to the Van Riebeeck mythology she countered:

'Die bloed is dan die selfde bloed, daar's nie 'n wit bloed nie en 'n swart bloed nie of 'n bruin bloed nie ... van Jan van Riebeeck se tyd hy't gepaar met die bruines, en die wittes saam met die bruines.' (The blood is then the same, there is not a white blood or a black blood or a brown blood ... from Jan van Riebeeck's time he mated with the brown people and the whites with the brown people).

In response, the farmer dragged her into his garage and gave her a thrashing for her insolence.⁶⁷

It is through the misconception about their racial hybridity that the stigma of illegitimacy has also been imputed to Coloured people. In terms of popular thinking, Coloured people originated largely from black-white sexual unions outside of wedlock. There is an enduring myth that the Coloured people resulted from prostitution and casual sex between slave and Khoisan women on the one hand and passing soldiers, sailors and other white 'riff-raff' on the other.⁶⁸ Cedric Dover's memorable description of the 'half-caste' in Western literature, 'his father is a blackguard, his mother is a whore', is an indication that it is not a peculiarly South African perception that miscegenation tends to be a failing of the lowest elements of society.⁶⁹ These associations of illegitimacy have contributed to the perception that Coloured people lack a proper heritage or pedigree, for as Hombi Ntshoko, an African woman from Langa, maintained: 'Coloureds don't know where they come from. We know where we come from. Whites know where they come from.'⁷⁰ Winnie Mandela's comment in 1991 that the Coloured people came about as a result of white men raping black women demonstrates that the idea that the Coloured community originated from extra-marital unions across the colour line is current not only among white racists but is broadly accepted in South

drunk as ...?' for completion. The answer 'a Coloured teacher' was meant, among other things, to signify that even 'respectable' Coloureds could not escape their racial destiny.

66. J. Lelyveld, *Move your Shadow: South Africa Black and White* (London, 1985), 261.

67. Field, 'Remembering Experience', 122.

68. See, for instance, Marais, *Cape Coloured People*, 9–10, 31, and P. Maylam, *South Africa's Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation and Apartheid*, (Aldershot, 2001), 42.

69. C. Dover, *Half-Caste* (London, 1937), 13.

70. Caliguire, 'Voices from the Communities', in James, *Now That We are Free*, 11.

African society.⁷¹ Despite coming from an ideological position diametrically opposed to that of white racism and meant as a rebuke to white maledom, Mandela's remark reveals a similar misunderstanding regarding the nature and origin of Coloured identity.

Perceived to have originated largely from illicit sexual relations the Coloured community as a whole has indelibly been stained by the mark of illegitimacy. The idea that at its very genesis the Coloured people had been conceived in 'sin' contributes to the notion amongst racists that Coloureds are somehow defective and form a special breed of lesser beings – God's step-children, as Sarah Gertrude Millin vividly put it.⁷² This is also apparent from the way the punchline of the Van Riebeeck joke sets Coloured people apart from the rest of humanity. This outlook is, furthermore, reflected in jokes that depict Coloured people as the unintended consequence of the devil's hapless attempts at imitating God's creation of humanity. In these jokes, the devil's creations turn out to be brown and not white, and, when placed on earth, walk off singing, dancing and drinking wine.⁷³ A variant on this joke has God baking figures of clay that come to life when placed on earth. Every now and then, God would be heard to exclaim in frustration, 'Damn, I burnt another one!', and toss it into Africa. Depending on the degree of scorching, the damaged figure would turn out to be either Coloured or African, and exhibit behaviour appropriate to their racial stereotype.

To evoke laughter, the punchline of the Van Riebeeck joke draws mainly upon a shared perception between teller and audience that both racial hybridity and illegitimacy are humiliating and shameful. It is clear that for people to react spontaneously to this joke, the images, values and assumptions about Colouredness that are evoked have to be part and parcel of their waking consciousness and instantaneously accessible to their minds, given the appropriate cues. The joke, however, goes beyond the imputed traits of hybridisation and illegitimacy, and draws upon other aspects of Coloured stereotyping for embellishment.

Although not raised directly by the joke, the implicit question of who Van Riebeeck and his merry band's sexual partners were, evokes the popular association of Coloured people with the Khoisan and hence with a 'savage' past. Whereas the Coloured protagonist in the Van Riebeeck joke might put much store by his or her partial European descent and assimilation to Western culture, both teller and audience are nevertheless likely to be mindful of the Khoisan heritage associated with Colouredness.

In the popular mind, the association is an extremely derogatory one. This much is evident from the terms '*Boesman*' (Bushman or San) and '*Hotnot*' (Hottentot or Khoikhoi) carrying the most opprobrium of the racial slurs that can

71. *Cape Times*, 30 Apr. 1991.

72. S.G. Millin, *God's Stepchildren* (Cape Town, 1924).

73. I recall this joke in the 1960s and 1970s to have been one of the favourites of a well-to-do Coloured businessman and former member of the Union Council of Coloured Affairs (UCCA) who used it to denounce the supposedly improvident habits of the Coloured working class.

be hurled at Coloured people.⁷⁴ The contractions ‘Hottie’, ‘Bushy’ or ‘Boesie’ are also sometimes used.⁷⁵ The extreme derogation of these words lie in the images of physical ugliness, repulsive social practices and mental and social inferiority they conjure up. In 1919, a correspondent to the *S.A. Clarion*, a newspaper aimed at a Coloured readership, remarked that ‘one would have a quarrel on one’s hands if one addressed a coloured in a Cape Town street as Hotnot even if that person had three-quarters Hotnot blood in his veins’.⁷⁶ Gerald Stone’s description of the meaning of ‘Boesman’ in the lexicon of working-class Coloured people more than half a century later is ‘a seriously insulting reference to coloured person, denoting putatively San features: sparse peppercorn hair, flat nose, wizened face, dry yellow skin, steatopygic posture, small stature: connoting insignificance, ugliness, poverty, vagrancy, treachery’.⁷⁷ From my experience of the way in which the term has been used by outgroups to describe Coloured people, moral and intellectual inferiority should be added to this list. Generations of South Africans, both black and white, have had negative stereotypes of ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentots’ instilled into them, especially during school history lessons.⁷⁸ The deep opprobrium and emotive associations attached to these terms is demonstrated by a riot being sparked off in the sleepy West Coast town of Laaiplek in 1987, when a local white resident called one of the Coloured townsmen a ‘Hotnot’.⁷⁹

In popular discourse, the Khoisan origins of Coloured people are often used to explain racial traits ascribed to them. Negative characteristics attributed to the Khoisan have thus been projected onto the Coloured grouping as a whole, invoking

74. My own, admittedly subjective, observation is that these terms have lost some of their pejorative meaning in recent times through frequent airing in public, as Coloured people challenge racial stereotyping and insults and as they sometimes apply these terms to themselves. A good example is Peter Marais’s assertion in late 2001 that the Democratic Alliance was a party of rich white people who needed a few ‘Hotnots’ to win an election. An interesting aside is that the wildly popular winner of the ‘Big Brother, South Africa’ reality television contest, Ferdinand Rabie, characterised himself as ‘the last white Boesman of the Western Cape’, presumably a reference to his foul-mouthed and boorish behaviour which included urinating and defecating in the garden. Ferdi, to my knowledge, drew no criticism for using the ‘B-word’: see *Cape Times*, 20 Dec. 2001.
75. Stone, ‘Socio-Semantic Analysis’, 386–7, 391; Branford, *Dictionary of South African English*, 56; *Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, 88, 295. Stone, 387, records the comic version ‘Boesmanian’ and Branford, 167, the term ‘kroesie’ a rhyming reference to frizzy hair.
76. *S.A. Clarion*, 26 Apr. 1919.
77. Stone, ‘Socio-Semantic Analysis’, 386–7.
78. For an analysis of the negative stereotyping of Khoisan peoples in school history texts, see A. Smith ‘The Hotnot Syndrome: Myth-Making in South African School Textbooks’, *Social Dynamics*, 9, 2 (Dec. 1983), 37–49. For accounts of the repugnance evoked by the Khoisan in Western society generally, see Z. Strother, ‘Display of the Body Hottentot’, in B. Lindfors, ed., *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington, 1999); M. van Wyk Smith, ‘“The Most Wretched of the Human Race”: The Iconography of the Khoikhoi (Hottentots), 1500–1800’, *History and Anthropology*, 5, 3–4 (1992), 285–330; L. Merians, *Envisioning the Worst: Representations of ‘Hottentots’ in Early-Modern England* (Newark, 2001).
79. *Cape Times*, 16 Nov. 1987.

images of inveterate laziness, irresponsibility, dirtiness and a penchant for thievery which are often assumed to have been inherited by Coloured people from their Khoisan ancestors. This much is apparent from another popular joke that sometimes also served as an utterance of frustration, especially among employers, at the alleged waywardness of Coloured employees: 'You can take the Coloured out of the bush but you cannot take the bush out of the Coloured'; or an alternative more to the point: 'You can take the Coloured out of the bush, man, but you cannot take the Bushman out of the Coloured.'⁸⁰

It is worth noting that, while Coloured people have been strongly associated with their Khoisan progenitors, there has not been a corresponding identification with a slave heritage. There are two basic reasons for this. First, the Cape, unlike most New World slave societies, did not develop a vigorous slave culture largely because of the atomised pattern of slaveholding, the extreme ethnic diversity of the slave population and the high death rate among importees.⁸¹ Since slaves were thus, by and large, not able to transmit a coherent body of learnt behaviour and communal experience from one generation to the next, an identifiably slave culture remained weak and attenuated at the Cape.⁸² The conscious identification with a slave past did thus not survive much beyond the lives of freed slaves themselves. Secondly, because slaves were defined in terms of their legal status, their descendants were able to escape the stigma of slave ancestry fairly easily after Emancipation. In popular consciousness, vague connotations of a servile past have been attached to Coloured identity through, for example, the annual reminder of the coon carnival and the use of the pejorative label 'Gam'⁸³ to describe working-class Coloured people.⁸⁴

80. I have heard versions of this saying applied to Africans as well, along the lines of 'You can take the Kaffir out of the bush but you can't take the bush out of the Kaffir'. For an example of a Coloured man using this expression to denigrate Africans, see Field, 'Fragile Identities', in Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 105.
81. N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge, 1985), 93–100; Adhikari, 'Sons of Ham', 99–102.
82. Malay identity, of which the profession of Islam is the main feature, though popularly associated with a slave past, was dependent on the participation of free blacks who had the personal freedom to maintain a culturally distinct lifestyle.
83. 'Gam' is the Afrikaans word for 'Ham', and is a reference to the biblically derived justification for the enslavement of black people. It later served as a rationalisation for their menial status: see Adhikari, 'Sons of Ham', 95–6; Wicomb, 'Shame and Identity', 100; G. Stone, 'Identity among Lower-Class Coloured People', in M. Whisson and H. van der Merwe, eds, *Coloured Citizenship in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1972), 34–7. Both Branford, *Dictionary of South African English*, 101 and *Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, 243–4 wrongly attribute the origins of the word to a contraction of 'Gammal', an Afrikaans version of Mohamed: see Stone, 'Socio-Semantic Analysis', 407–8. For a general discussion of the Hamitic myth, see W. Evans, 'From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the "Sons of Ham"', *American Historical Review*, 85 (1980), 15–43; W. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 17–20, 35–7.
84. In my experience, few people who use the term 'Gam' do so with any knowledge of its servile or biblical origins. This is confirmed by Stone, 'Socio-Semantic Analysis', 407.

Coloured people, however, could not so easily avoid being associated with the Khoisan because the defining characteristics in this instance were racially attributed and genetically transmitted physical traits. Some physical traits – such as those that have served as markers of the Khoisan physical type, as the colloquialisms ‘*boesman korrels*’ (Bushman corns or tufts)⁸⁵ and ‘*Hotnot holle*’, vernacular Afrikaans for steatopygia, indicate – have been racialised in an extremely derogatory manner. I have personally known a number of Coloured people, all within the working class, nick-named ‘*Boesman*’ or ‘*Hotnot*’ because they displayed what were taken to be typical Khoisan physical features.⁸⁶ While these nicknames could signify endearment or be ironic and self-deprecating,⁸⁷ they are generally derogatory and are an indication that white racist values have to a considerable degree been internalised by Coloured people who use them.

The Van Riebeeck joke also draws on the marginality of the Coloured community for heightened effect. While whites are represented by a pro-active and familiar figure symbolic of white supremacy⁸⁸ in the supposed making of the Coloured people, the black ancestors of the Coloured people remain faceless and passive. There has been an abiding perception that Coloured people played little or no constructive part in the history of South Africa and thus do not merit the recognition of historical personalities beyond what is necessary for whites to make sense of their own history.⁸⁹ This is very much part of the depersonalisation that is almost universally present in the way that dominant groups perceive those whom they dominate. For the quintessential expression of the depersonalisation of the

85. Z. Erasmus, ‘Re-Imagining Coloured Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa’ (Paper presented at ‘The Burden of Race? “Whiteness” and “Blackness” in Modern South Africa’ conference, University of the Witwatersrand, July 2001), 3. ‘Kroesie’ and ‘korrelkop’ are other terms applied to Coloured people that evoke an association with Khoisan ancestry: see Branford, *Dictionary of South African English*, 164, 167, 240; *Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, 394, 400, 548.
86. Not only does the use of such language run contrary to the sense of decorum – and more recently, the dictates of political correctness – of the Coloured middle class, but Khoisan physical features are also conspicuously less common within this social group. This is due to the Khoisan being assimilated into colonial society largely as farm labourers in the more remote rural areas. Their descendants thus tend to be poorer and relatively recent migrants to urban areas.
87. Among Afrikaans-speakers, both black and white, expressions such as ‘*my (ou) Hotnotjie*’ (my little [old] Hottentot’) or ‘*my (ou) Boesmantjie*’ (my little [old] Bushman) are used as terms of endearment equivalent to ‘my little darling’ or ‘my dear boy’: D.B. Bosman, I.W. van der Merwe and L.W. Hiemstra, *Tweetalige Woordeboek: Afrikaans-Engels/Engels-Afrikaans* (Cape Town, 1967), 103, 300; P. Grobbelaar, *Readers’ Digest Afrikaans-Engelse Woordeboek* (Cape Town, 1987), 80, 211.
88. The National Party government conceded as much when, in 1992, it announced that the portrait of Jan van Riebeeck was to be phased from the currency as part of its reforms.
89. Already in 1913, Harold Cressy, Coloured educationist and school principal, called upon Coloured teachers to dispel the myth that Coloured people played little or no role in the history of their country: *Cape Times*, 22 Mar. 1913; *Cape Argus*, 22 Mar. 1913.

Coloured people, one need go no further than former first lady Marike de Klerk's characterisation of the Coloured people:

... they [Coloureds] are a negative group. The definition of a coloured in the population register is someone that is not black, and is not white and is also not an Indian, in other words a no-person. They are the leftovers. They are the people that were left after the nations were sorted out. They are the rest.⁹⁰

Coloured marginality is evoked in other ways by the joke. Many, both black and white, will recognise that the joke masks the sexual violence that accompanied colonisation and coercive unions between white masters and Khoisan servants. Steinberg summarises a version common within the Coloured working classes: 'The early colonists picked the vagrant women off the beach, the story goes, put them in their kitchens as slaves, and fucked them like beasts to produce bastards.'⁹¹ Coloured marginality is also evoked in subtle, unspoken ways. In human interaction one of the psycho-social functions of humour is to demonstrate and affirm power. Jokes therefore often seek to humiliate and demean or depend on vituperation to raise a laugh as the international examples of 'Paddy' or 'blonde' jokes and local examples of 'Gammatjie and Abdoltjie' or 'Raj' jokes demonstrate.⁹² Thus, those who considered themselves superior to Coloureds were likely to have found the joke all the funnier because it reinforced their conceit that they were able to laugh at Coloured people with impunity. On the other hand, Coloured people who laughed at it – in my experience many more Coloured people laughed at the joke than took offence – confirmed their marginality by acquiescing in their own denigration.

The targets of demeaning humour are, however, not entirely powerless, because humour can of course also be harnessed for retaliation. This would explain the immense popularity of 'Van der Merwe' jokes among Coloured people during the apartheid era. The 'stupid and uncultured Afrikaner' stereotype represented by Van der Merwe provided the perfect foil for Coloured people to assert their worth as human beings and to hit back at those whom they regarded to be the most rabidly racist and their main oppressors.⁹³

The popularity of the Van Riebeeck joke has waned in recent years. The amelioration of inter-black political divisions in the post-1976 environment, the growth of a mass, non-racial democratic movement during the 1980s, and the

90. Quoted in B. McLennan, *Apartheid: The Lighter Side* (Cape Town, 1990), 59.

91. Steinberg, *The Number*, 264.

92. Gammatjie and Abdoltjie, contracted, diminutive, Afrikaans forms of Mohamed and Abdullah, are stereotypes of the stupid Malay and have a female equivalent 'Meraai'. 'Raj' is the stereotype of the stupid Tamil-speaking Indian. The former have predominated in the Western Cape and the latter in Natal.

93. Two examples of Van der Merwe jokes: 'Why would a doctor never use a rectal thermometer on Van der Merwe?' 'It is likely to cause brain damage.' 'Why does Van der Merwe have a hole in his trouser pocket?' 'So he can count to eleven [some would say thirteen].'

dawning of the 'new South Africa' have progressively made the values and sentiments embodied in the joke less acceptable in public discourse. The growing rejection of Coloured identity by politicised Coloureds from the mid 1970s onwards meant that crude racist thinking of the sort embodied in this joke became unacceptable to a widening constituency of people. By the late 1980s, even the likes of the Reverend Alan Hendrickse, the leader of the collaborationist Labour Party, sometimes rejected Coloured identity. In a heated moment in parliament he, for example, lashed out at the National Party: 'God made me a man, the National Party made me a Coloured man.'⁹⁴

Although the image of Van Riebeeck is far less pervasive than it was in the 'old' South Africa, it has nevertheless remained a powerful symbol of white supremacy in the new millennium.⁹⁵ Bizarre confirmation of this occurred at a formal dinner on 31 October 2000, organised by a local black economic empowerment company to celebrate Cape Town's cultural diversity and to promote racial tolerance. At the dinner held in the banquet hall of the Castle in Cape Town, one of the guests, Priscilla De Wet-Fox, who claims to be the head-person of the Chainnouqua Khoi-Khoi tribe of the Oudtshoorn region, heckled speakers and subjected the gathering to a tirade about the colonial oppression of the Khoi. Upon being escorted out of the function, she 'attacked' a bronze bust of Van Riebeeck in the foyer, damaging it and causing its eyes to pop out when she pushed it off its pedestal. De Wet-Fox later justified her actions by saying that 'Van Riebeeck lied to my ancestors' and that he was a symbol of European colonialism that made her feel 'ashamed of being me, of looking like me'.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Humour is intrinsic to human interaction and forms an integral part of popular culture. For these reasons, jokes disclose much about the societies and communities in which they become current. Because people reveal their values, aspirations, fears, hatreds and most other aspects of their social experience through humour, jokes, especially the more enduring and popular ones, are authentic reflections of the perceptions, attitudes and mores of the societies in which they circulate, and are often more reliable indicators of popular thinking than the conventional sources used by historians and social analysts.⁹⁷

This authenticity is guaranteed to the extent that jokes not only have to resonate with the values, sensibilities and experiences of their target audiences to

94. *Cape Times*, 28 Sep. 1988.

95. For a discussion of the controversy over whether or not the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck should be celebrated, see *Cape Times*, 30 Nov. 2001; and for a report of a protest march against the idea organised by De Wet-Fox, see *Cape Times*, 7 Dec. 2001.

96. *Cape Argus*, 4 Nov. 2000.

97. See, for example, A. Dundas, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humour Cycles and Stereotypes* (New York, 1987), vi–vii.

survive, but have also to make sense instantaneously to elicit the appropriate response. The Van Riebeeck joke, by any yardstick, provides an accurate and dependable gauge of popular attitudes toward Coloured people during the apartheid era. At the core of its success and longevity as a joke lie the popular assumptions that Colouredness is an automatic product of miscegenation and that racial hybridity, together with its associations of illegitimacy and racial inferiority, are shameful and therefore open to ridicule. The joke also indirectly draws on a wide range of derogatory imagery about the Khoisan and the marginality of Coloured people, as well as the racially attributed trait of their profligacy for embellishment. That most Coloured people were able to laugh at this ribbing and accept Jan van Riebeeck as the 'father' of the Coloured people is a measure of just how hegemonic the racist ideas and assumptions behind the joke were in apartheid South Africa. The evidence indicates that this has been slow to change in the post-apartheid environment, despite the dictates of political correctness that govern South African public life. Ongoing racial tensions between Coloureds and Africans are the clearest indication of this.⁹⁸ The appropriately named Blackman Ngoro's stunningly ill-conceived racist rant against Coloured people published on his website in mid 2005 demonstrates that these racial stereotypes are very much alive and well. Ngoro, media adviser to former Cape Town mayor Nomaindia Mfeketo, claimed, among other things, that Africans were culturally superior to Africans and that 'Coloureds must undergo an ideological transformation if their race is to improve and not die a drunken death'.

98. For further elaboration, see M. Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens, Ohio, 2005), 175–87.