



TAAL MONUMENT: Afrikaners must rid themselves of negative images.

ERIC MILLER

Afrikaners 'is nie almal so nie'

EARLIER THIS year I found myself staring into a campfire in Maputoland in northern Natal with three fellow Afrikaans-speakers and some black trainee journalists. Conversation carefully turned to ethnic matters and, in jest, one of us asked the black trainees how they would see us, were they to pretend that they had just met us.

"We would think you were members of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging," one said. "Why?" we asked, "because we all have beards?" "No," came the reply, "because you speak Afrikaans."

This tallies with research done some years ago by Rand Afrikaans University MA student Mercia Blignaut at an English private school in Johannesburg where she was teaching: more than 50 percent of pupils polled believed all Afrikaners belonged to the AWB. It poses the question: how do decent Afrikaners, ready for the new South Africa, rid themselves of this unfair image? How do they get the troglodytes of the AWB off their backs?

The issue is fraught with dilemmas.

How do decent Afrikaners – and Afrikaans – get the troglodytes of the AWB off their backs? Not by avoiding the question of what it means to be an Afrikaner, says HANS PIENAAR.

Earlier this year I put my name to an advertisement by 150 Afrikaners which called for steps to be taken against the right wing, and made the point that Afrikaners "is nie almal so nie" (aren't all like that), to borrow the title of a recent bestseller by Jeanne Goosen.

Few of us, I believe, foresaw any great reaction but we were surprised that the only aggression came from two friends, who lambasted us in letters to the press for seeking publicity and being guilty of Afrikaner chauvinism simply by identifying ourselves as Afrikaners.

The incident demonstrates the passions involved and the dilemma facing Afrikaans-speakers. "Afrikaner" is still a race-exclusive concept. Very few black Afrikaans-speakers, who constitute 40 percent of all Afrikaans-speakers, have the slightest desire to call themselves Afrikaners.

Peter John Massyn, an Afrikaans lecturer at Wits University, was right: invoke the word Afrikaner, even for the sake of redefining it, and you step right into the old racial trap left behind by apartheid – you are unintentionally propagating a racial concept.

But Massyn was also one of the organisers of a conference held recently at Wits, which in trying to avoid falling into one trap, fell headlong into another – the result of ignoring issues which are of immediate concern not only to Afrikaans-speakers, but also to many of their fellow South Africans worried by the AWB.

Entitled "Afrikaans uit die Doofpot" (after John Miles's prize-winning novel about a hit squad Kroniek uit die Doofpot), the conference aimed to debate the liberation of Afrikaans from its repressive past (the "doofpot" or extinguisher). One would think that

at least 40 percent of the activities or topics of such a conference would involve black Afrikaners, as liberating Afrikaans clearly involves opening it up to the very people whose forefathers created it, and who were suppressed (put in the "doofpot") in the name of the preservation of Afrikaans.

Indeed, if one were to apply the Maputoland campfire test, the Wits conference could well have been branded AWB. Nearly all the speakers were white and lower middle-class to poor and a great number had beards.

Of course it is inconceivable that racism would have motivated the members of a department which has a proud history of fighting apartheid. Rather it was a most peculiar shunning of politics for "true cultural issues", and an ironic one, given the bruising battles fought with academia over the belief that one can keep culture free of politics.

Thus there was an almost obsessive attempt to avoid using, discussing or even mentioning one word: Afrikaner. It was nowhere to be seen or heard before the conference, not on a poster, not in the pro-

gramme, not in any press release. Very rarely did any of the speakers use it.

However, the audience continuously returned to questions of Afrikaner identity, showing what a miscalculation it was to ignore it, but for them too, blacks and the right wing did not seem to exist.

The survival of Afrikaans was discussed at length, yet again, but there was little awareness that in the townships an Afrikaans word breathed in the dark could threaten the survival of the user. The stark fact of our political life, that in the name of the survival of Afrikaans and its power relations people are being killed, did not begin to feature.

For most conference participants "doofpot" seemed to stand for literature as a kitchen debate, whereas in Miles's novel it encapsulates systematic and prolonged racial and fascist violence.

What makes this attitude significant outside academia is that it is symptomatic of the problems most Afrikaners have with their Afrikaner-hood. It also

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demonstrates the kind of corner into which members of other ethnic minorities the world over paint themselves.

Ordinary people have numerous sources of identity on which they can draw to define themselves in their daily grappling with life in a fragmented world. For many, ethnic identity would be last or second-last on a list of priorities, pushed there by a dozen other more immediate concerns: work, sex, relationship, parenthood, religion, self-image, neighbourliness and so on.

So, speaking out on issues like Afrikaner-hood often requires speaking of the unfamiliar in practical terms, and even inventing an identity where there is none - which is why right-wing ethnic gatherings are so artificial and ritualistic. When in addition, as is the case with Afrikaner-hood, there has been an association with unsavoury power practices, it is understandable that most become a silent majority on the issue - as most Afrikaners have done.

But there are times when ethnicity does become an immediate, poisonous issue - when members of other groups start looking at you, even around campfires, and see people they fear and mistrust. Then the words of Afrikaans philosopher Johan Degenaar come into play: "Pretending that one's identity is created by oneself, is undemocratic."

The approach at the Wits conference was to sweep black people and the right wing under the carpet. However, this amounts to censorship, even when it is done consciously to demonstrate non-allegiance to Afrikaner-hood. What springs to mind is the way in which Germans, for decades, refused to debate the problematics surrounding the word "German", with the results evident today.

The Maputoland test shows that Afrikaans-speakers, especially those in positions of power such as the Wits conference convenors, owe it to their fellow South Africans to speak up on what it means to be Afrikaners, even (perhaps particularly) if it entails denying that it means anything.

Afrikaans does not yet exist in a normal context. No longer is it the language of apartheid, but it has become the language of the third force and the death squad, which is worse.

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DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA 1994 BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

◆ **Conference Announcement & Call for Papers**

The Society's two-yearly conference will be held in Stellenbosch, 5-7 October 1994. The conference theme will be:

FUNDING FOR DEVELOPMENT

The conference steering committee is setting down themes and sub-themes and welcomes any suggestions in this regard. As is our practise, panels and sub-groups will also be organised. Please direct any enquiries in this regard to the committee. The Society has decided to invite two international guests to address the first day's deliberations. Other invitees will participate in the other two days.

Please expect further notification before September 1994.

◆ **Conference steering committee:** Christéle Cronjé, Salomé Meyer, Francois Theron, Peter Vale

◆ **Conference Address:** c/o Salomé Meyer, Private Bag X7, Goodwood 7460

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