The melting pot

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MANY "tribal" groups are represented in Soweto, speaking mutually unintelligible languages and having different backgrounds of *custom and tradition. This raises two important* questions. First, whether the individual identifies primarily with his ethnic group, or "tribe", conceiving it as a clearly bounded group in opposition to other similar groups within the urban setting.

This is the problem of political ethnicity — an ideological alternative to either African nationalism or nonracial South Africanism; second, whether Blacks in town continue to practice cultural ethnicity; i.e., whether they adhere to ethnic customs, norms, values and symbols, including, of course, language.

Cultural ethnicity usually supports political ethnicity, but it can stand on its own. Where it does, we have only ethnic "categories", but not ethnic "groups". The most common alternatives perceived as replacing cultural ethnicity among urban Africans are either identification with a new common Black culture or with "Western" culture.

Ethnicity

On the evidence of various cities in independent Africa we might expect in Soweto continuing or increasing manifestations of ethnic groupings, particularly in the form of powerful tribal associations. The Department of Bantu Affairs seemed to be thinking on some such lines when in 1955 it introduced a policy of residential *segregation for the major language groups in the* new Johannesburg townships.

However, exclusive tribal patriotism seems to have almost died in Soweto, if we consider only explicitly formulated ideologies and main institutional forms. Ideologically, it is race and class oppositions that are claimed to matter, while ethnic oppositions are denied or simply shrugged off. This was one of the most clear cut findings in the whole mass of research material.

This does not tell quite the whole story, because research also indicated that ethnic categories do still have considerable resonance in daily interaction. Sometimes this can simply result from the official policy of concentrating members of ethnic groups in separate townships; e.g., associations (football clubs, choirs, and the like) recruiting their members predominately from a single ethnic group.

But sometimes it reflects a voluntary preference for associates with the same ethnic or language background. Such "miniethnicity" is not infrequent among illiterates with rural backgrounds. Their leisure time friends are often not only from the same "tribe", but also "homeboys" from the same country area.

Even the highly educated often *de facto* move within a circle speaking their language, but they stress that "I have never really thought about it. Ethnic grouping does not itself mean anything to me." This applies to very many people of all levels. Similarly with "tribal" endogamy. Many parents would still prefer their children to find a partner from their own language group ("I would prefer them to marry a Sotho, because they know the customs and speak the language"), but they would add significantly, "I would not force them" — a telling support for the popular claim that ethnic boundary maintenance is no longer a matter of supreme concern in Soweto.

The Melting Pot

Many statements playing down ethnicity as a factor in group identity or individual relations obviously went beyond the objective reality. "There are so many groups. You hardly know or can be bothered about who belongs to which." Others, more in accord with reality, would say that although "tribal" divisions have not yet disappeared, their disappearance was both desirable and inevitable.

Younger people remarked they would intentionally make friends from other tribes. They foretold that "in the next two generations Soweto will be a pure African national place with no Zulu, or Sotho, or Shangaan, or Xhosa, but only Africans".

The preponderant ideology expressed here, that of the melting pot, is justified most consistently and emphatically by the consciousness of a common African identity, or in the language of a few years ago, by African nationalism.

Whereas in tribally homogeneous East London-Mdantsane, with its many unemployed Blacks, political consciousness seemed to focus on pass laws and job reservation, a major focus in polyglot Soweto has been the Government's policy of "supporting tribalism" by introducing residential segregation on ethnic lines. The same formulae of resentment were encountered right down to the rank and file. "The motive behind this policy *is to kill the spirit which was gradually growing* among these different tribes — the spirit of African nationalism. If one makes the small nations to clash among themselves, they will somehow forget about the major enemy." "We

are all Africans here, suffering from the same malady — the unjustice of Government."

The ideological depreciation of political ethnicity is not felt to be incompatible with singling out *Shangaan and Venda for disparaging comments.* "The Shangaan have funny habits. They are not clear." To the "civilised" citizens of Soweto this "distancing" does not reflect a low ranking of Shangaan as an ethnic group, but a reaction to the Shangaan display of tribal distinctiveness, and their excluding themselves from the civilised norms. It is not an expression of ethnicity, but antiethnicity.

The Homeland Link

Has "deethnization" in Soweto then proceeded beyond the point of no return? The Government emphasises "homeland links" and tries to propagate "national identifications. The evidence suggests that it is too late for this kind of political ethnicity; its place is likely to be taken more and more by Black ethnicity.

Reemergence of groups based on common ethnicity is not only possible but rather common, whenever residual feelings of ethnic identity can be exploited. Pressure groups may form, using the ethnic idiom. This happened in postcolonial Africa when the departure of the White administration offered scope for new forms of competition between groups for economic or social advantages. It is happening in South Africa today.

In some contexts, therefore, ethnicity has been increasing in Soweto in recent years. However, generally speaking, the total volume of political and economic power available to Africans in the townships seem too limited for this kind of ethnic revival to become a major phenomenon.

In regard to ethnicity informants referred to the strong group consciousness of the Afrikaners and their political dominance over other Whites as well as Blacks. As we have seen, only a few traditionalists among the Blacks at present show a similar desire for boundary maintenance and group emphasis. It is unpredictable whether one day in the future, in an independent Soweto, the numerically preponderant Zulu speakers might be tempted to use ethnicity in a bid for power.

So far the homelands have very little tangible to offer the urban dwellers. On the contrary, they appear to threaten a further diminution of their security in town. In East London and Mdantsane people expressed their dread of being sent back to homelands — as they put it — "to starve". The homelands are seen as places where work either is not available or is underpaid, except for the few educated who may land posts in the bureaucracy.

However, urban Africans may well feel increasing sentimental or emotional concern with the homelands or their leaders. Chief Buthelezi, and other homeland politicians, are immensely popular in Soweto, especially among ordinary people. Their popularity is somewhat qualified among the educated, who sympathise with Buthelezi's pragmatism and yet remain critical of the whole homeland policy. Many of them continue to support the traditional African National Congress (ANC) policy of a common, non-racial South Africa and totally reject separate development.

Urban residents who still have homeland links generally try to keep them up, because of their feelings of insecurity in town. Only if or when Soweto residents, as distinct from migrants, begin to see that the homeland leaders or parties are able to wield real influence on their behalf, are they likely to give active support to organisations that are developing around homeland representatives in town. In any case, there is little reason why such organisations should introduce ethnic oppositions or rivalries into the urban field itself.

On the contrary, the lot of the urban African may well become a major area for co-operation between the various homeland authorities, so that the homeland links, rather than "retribalising" urban residents, might help to "Africanise" homeland policies. Defining his views on the responsibility of homeland leaders towards urban Blacks, Chief Buthelezi spoke in terms of Black solidarity as against divisive ethnicity.

Here then is one of the notable differences between Black urbanism in Soweto and in many other African cities, notably those in West Africa. Three reasons seem to account for this difference.

First the Soweto rank and file interpret relations with Whites in terms of economic class. In *the copper belt, in the late days of colonial rule,* tribalism was transcended in situations of industrial confrontations between White management and Black workers. On the Rand today, all vertical divisions between Africans are conceived as undesirable, if not meaningless. "The struggle we are all facing for economic reasons is the same."

Second, in the social world of the Blacks themselves, class distinctions are widely seen as more important than ethnic ones. In the copper belt of the 1950s, "tribalism" was still "the most important category of day-to-day interaction". In Soweto the prestige principle has come to surpass the ethnicity principle in importance and has often supplanted it.

Third, the long experience of Blacks' living together has accelerated the processes of cultural integration within the townships. A strong nucleus of settled inhabitants can look back to years of ethnically intermingled living. Even for the rest situations in which tribal norms govern behaviour have dwindled.

The new common norms are not only designed to cope with casual encounters, but present fully

developed guides to expected behaviour. The common culture is seen as belonging to the same family as that of the Whites. Part of the process of cultural integration within the townships is the wide use of English and the *Tsotsi taal* or "lingo". English is claimed to be the "Black man's *lingua franca*", and is used freely even by those with little formal education; the *taal*, an Afrikaans-based patois, is much in vogue even by the educated who were brought up in town.

Ethnic Renewal?

There is, however, a sense in which cultural ethnicity seems to be making a comeback among urban Blacks. Today the value of "keeping customs" is openly appreciated by many of the better educated. Afrikaners, Jews and Indians are quoted as successful examples of this. "Jews may be Westernised, but they still keep to their customs." The speaker may feel regretfully that this is too late for him personally. "I cannot guide anybody in his traditions. I have lost them. This is a bad thing, because along the wayside somewhere you find yourself lost. If you can, it is better to keep both (traditions and modern ways."

Until recently traditional customs were observed more fully, but especially more openly, as one descended the educational ladder. However, the educated,, who appeared to be striving for complete cultural assimilation, may often have been less committed to this goal than they appeared. Many educated Black townspeople have Marrano-like quietly retained enough of the old faith to go to a great deal of trouble to practice it *sub rosa*.

Our respondents blamed them mainly for their timidity. "They do not want to be seen doing a thing that does not belong to Western civilisation, because a person may laugh at them. They have no truth to themselves", unlike the "simple people" who follow the customs and traditions without wavering. "They are like Abraham who had true faith in God ... He was prepared to sacrifice his only son."

The present tendency among the educated, even among intellectuals, is to be more open and tolerant in these matters. For instance, it is very common for a goat to be slaughtered at funerals and weddings in Soweto. People are fairly open with the use of "medicines"; perhaps they are least open about witchcraft beliefs, which are referred to as "undesirable superstitions".

The whole question waits for a lead to be given by African intellectuals and trend setters. At present, as a respondent said, people "are fumbling in darkness and don't know where they are going." Lobola, as is well known, is widely practiced, especially so among the better-off, and is appreciated by the women as enhancing their dignity in a patriarchal society.

In the linguistically homogeneous African townships of the Cape it is argued that though Xhosa initiation is Xhosa and not universally African, it is still African as distinct from European. In Soweto, where there are many different African language groups or tribes, the same argument was heard about customs specific to any particular one of them.

In this light, sentiments of African nationalism and traditionalistic tribal customs are not felt to be mutually exclusive. Besides, many customs were claimed to be common to all Africans: e.g., respect and hospitality, the broad principles of lobola and clan exogamy, the practice of sacrifice, and, of course, the all-embracing concept of "humanity" (*ubuntu*).

Soweto people, then, see themselves as settling down into a common Black identity. But they see the identity as belonging within the family of Western (industrial-urban) cultures. In their eyes, this kind of life-style should allow them freedom in their private lives to seek ethnic identification or assimilation, as they choose; something that indeed, White and other South Africans would claim as well.

PAIR OF SPANNERS   By Bob Connolly