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THE new language of multiculturalism

is not apartheid ideology in another guise.

Anthropologist JOHN SHARP details the differences.

THE motto for President Nelson Mandela's inauguration proclaimed that South Africans are "one nation, many cultures".

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others have referred to South Africa as a "rainbow nation", enjoining us to celebrate our diversity. Some people may be rather discomforted by these borrowings from the discourses of "multiculturalism". Can the new South Africa afford to emphasise cultural diversity in this fashion? Does the language of multiculturalism provide a clean enough break with the past, or will it allow the old shibboleths that stressed ethnic separation to persist unchallenged?

What does multiculturalism actually entail, and why should so many people in Canada, the United States and Australia – particularly native and immigrant minorities – have pressed so vigorously for its official recognition over the past few decades? Part of the answer lies in the long-standing cultural chauvinism displayed, in these states, by the English-speaking populations of European origin.

These people, of settler stock, were numerically dominant and had a firm grasp on political and economic power. For much of the long period from the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, they attempted to force native minorities, African-Americans, and later immigrants from parts of the world other than Europe, to assimilate to the "mainstream". Indeed, the goal was that they should disappear quietly into the melting-pots designed to turn out Americans, Canadians and Australians who were standardised on the European settler model.

The demand that cultural diversity should be respected has grown in prominence in these states since World War II, and is a reaction to the dominant project of forced assimilation that was long pursued.

This demand was also fuelled by the ambiguities inherent in the assimilationist project. Native minorities, for instance, were forced to give up their languages, their religious beliefs and their modes of livelihood;



PRAISE SINGER: Parliament goes multicultural.

Picture: THE ARGUS

but at the same time those who did attempt to assimilate and to succeed in the world centred on European standards of propriety, found themselves blocked by prejudice.

They were, in other words, penalised for being what they were told they should aspire not to be – Indians or Aborigines. Moreover, since the prejudice displayed by the majority trapped them on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, their "difference" was devalued and denigrated.

The demand for multiculturalism is thus an attempt by people in this position to redeem their difference and give it a positive value. Minorities insist that being an Indian or an African-American or a Latino should be recognised by the whole society as an inherently worthy condition.

But there is one point about the growing celebration of diversity in these states of which South Africans should take special heed. This is that cultural difference is not being asserted simply as an end in itself. It is a

means to an end, and that end is *not* cultural or ethnic separatism after the fashion with which South Africans were all too familiar during the apartheid years.

African-Americans who celebrate their roots have absolutely no intention of recreating tropical Africa in North America; Chinese and Vietnamese journey to America to escape the paddy fields, not to reconstruct them. Their demand that their cultural differences be respected is, in large part, an attempt to get into the political and economic mainstream on more favourable terms, by circumventing and subverting long-standing prejudices, rather than to opt out of the wider society.

It is certainly true that many aspects of South Africa's past have been different from those of the states mentioned above. South Africa's dominant population, of similar European settler origin, was itself a minority, and it tried to solve the problem presented by the presence of "others" by means of forced segregation rather than forced assimilation.

mix cultures



CAPE CULTURE: Celebrating New Year.

But, as most South Africans are painfully aware, apartheid involved mere lip service to the notion of respect for cultural difference. Fulsome ideological pronouncements aside, its basis was a deep contempt for cultural diversity.

Current demands for respect for cultural diversity need to be seen against this background, which bears some similarities to the North American and Australian past, rather than as any indication of a continuing influence of apartheid logic.

Multiculturalism also rests on an understanding of "culture" that is very different from that which characterised the ideology of apartheid. Under apartheid, "culture" was taken to denote a whole "way of life" that was supposedly unique, and uniquely appropriate, to a particular ethnic group. The Zulu, it was argued, had their own culture, which was fundamentally different from the cultures of the Xhosa, the Tswana, the Afrikaners and the English. Moreover, it was the ostensible incompatibility of these various cultures that was taken to make separate development a necessity.

On the other hand, few of the minorities in North America that call for multiculturalism imagine that their particular cultural heritages are in any way incompatible with the dominant culture of the advanced industrial societies in which they live. Since their goal is to secure a better position within these societies, they are bound to be open to the notion that cultures can be blended – mixed and matched in a way that does not demand either total allegiance to the dominant culture or the obliteration of their particular heritages. Indeed, most native and immigrant minorities do not think of the cultures that multiculturalism is intended to protect as complete, and discrete, "ways of life".

On the contrary, these "cultures" have iconic, or emblematic, significance, as badges of identity, for people whose aspirations are also, and predominantly, to improve their lot within industrial society. Thus most of these people have a clear sense of the relativity of cultural difference.

Being native North American or African-American or Chinese is something one celebrates in the right context. There are times and places for being "different" – perhaps only on high days and holidays – as well as others for simply being Canadian or American or Australian.

People shift back and forth between these levels of identity. The ways in which they preserve their difference – in situational attachments to particularistic styles of music, costume and cuisine, rather than in totally different "ways of life" – serve to enrich the

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existence of the whole nations to which they belong without calling their existence into question.

There is little reason to suppose that the situation will be vastly different in South Africa. For better or worse, we inhabit an industrial society. During the century it has taken for this society to develop, the lives of all South Africans have been irretrievably altered. There is a sense in which everyone now wants the same sorts of things: permanent housing, electricity, running water, education for their children.

Indigenous South Africans may, on appropriate occasions, wax lyrical about the virtues of traditional cultures, but they are no more likely to want to live as foragers, nomadic pastoralists or pre-capitalist cultivators than the Afrikaans-speaking middle class would want to trade in their BMWs for oxwagons. To assert that one has one's own culture is to demand respect for one's dignity; it does not mean that one envisages a totally different way of life from

everyone else.

In the light of the above, I would stress the gulf that exists between the rhetoric of multiculturalism that is now emerging in South Africa and the old ideas of ethnic or cultural separatism that characterised apartheid. But there is one proviso. The nature of claims to cultural difference is affected by the degree to which those who make them perceive that the wider society is responsive to their demands for recognition of dignity and for fair access to material resources.

When people believe that there is scope for their lot to improve, then their assertions of difference are reflexive and relativistic. They realise that any claim to absolute cultural difference is, in many ways, a pose, or a performance, which can be sustained only by means of humour and irony.

But when people feel that they are totally marginalised by the wider society, and that there is no prospect of improvement to their quality of life, then the humour and the irony, and the sense that "difference", like similarity, is relative, all disappear. Then one is left with a truculent assertion of absolute difference, and with the ugly, intolerant side of identity politics.

Sociologists and anthropologists in North America draw a distinction between the critical, reflexive multiculturalism that is underpinned by hope, and the multiculturalism of absolute difference that is the product of despair. The point of this distinction is as relevant to South Africa as it is to North America.

If we wish to celebrate our diversity, to have many "cultures" making up one "rainbow" nation, we have to ensure that our society offers all its members the opportunity to participate in, and draw benefit from, mainstream political and economic activity, as well as the opportunity to proclaim their difference. ■

John Sharp is senior lecturer in the department of social anthropology at the University of Cape Town.