

Ever-changing force that apartheid refused to acknowledge

IRAN a workshop at a conference for people in higher education on our experience of violence. One man reported that when he grew up in a village in Limpopo, it was taken for granted that a man walking in the area was free to hit any boy he encountered, with no reason being necessary.

As a result, boys would do their best to avoid men on the path. He now ensures that at no time will his sons feel any fear of him, and takes pride in the warmth of their relationship.

If we are to advance a genuinely inclusive and non-violent society, we need to address – through criticism and action – such thorny issues as culture.

What apartheid allowed everyone was the myth of our “own”,



By Crispin Hemson

static culture – in fact it cultivated it as a rationale for enforcing separation.

Yet if we define culture as the meaning and practices of everyday life – the way we eat, the way we socialise, our sayings – it includes but goes beyond what we think of as our traditional culture.

Herding of cattle by boys is a cultural practice among Zulu people, but so is the use of cellphones and taxis.

Many cultural elements are in fact shared across ethnic and racial divisions.

This understanding was alien to apartheid. Its ideologues used a term intended to normalise racial domination and segregation, our “traditional way of life”: don’t challenge anything; we do it because we have always done it.

When people use culture as a euphemism for race, it feeds into this rigid idea of people defined by some fiction from the past, and risks recycling tired stereotypes as the basis for intercultural understanding.

For English, middle-class, white people to talk of our culture seems strange to us. But we have cultural meanings and practices in the same ways as anyone else. Why we don’t see it clearly is simply that ele-

ments of our culture, such as our language and lifestyle, are still dominant in society, and hence seem “normal”.

What then was our cultural reality when I was growing up? If we thought about it, which we seldom did, I think we would have identified a pride in doing things efficiently, and winning at sport.

But I think also of the practice of giving domestic workers tea in jam tins or broken cups.

I even heard the tale of someone who, faced with the quandary of having no such cup, broke off the handle of one to give to the worker. One student told me how he had worked over weekends in someone’s garden, and had drunk tea that still had the taste of jam in it.

This systematic humiliation

was as much part of the core of apartheid as violent repression. It was also as much part of our culture as the positive elements.

The uncomfortable reality is that our cultures have been shot through with inequality and oppression. We should not protect culture at the expense of people; we should also seek out in culture the elements that can inform a fully human society.

At the new airport, Andries Botha’s statue of Shaka as a herder of cattle, with its connotations of care and productivity, was removed to be replaced by the more conventional image of the warrior king.

This image privileged a militaristic view of Zulu men found in Western literature from colonial times to the present.

It brought the image of Shaka in line with the statues of our colonial rulers, which similarly emphasise power and dominance.

In sharp contrast, I think back to the conflicts over beach desegregation in the 1980s. As a regular at Durban’s North Beach, I was familiar with the white beach culture.

Once the beaches were desegregated, African women began to use a beach much safer than those previously available to them. You would see a large woman rolling in the water, giggling, with maybe a breast casually escaping the ineffectual clutches of the bra and needing to be corralled again.

This outraged some letter writers to this newspaper. I understood it differently. I had seen few white women behaving with the same re-

laxed openness to the physical environment. As a teacher I would hear young white women, students, sympathise with the sexism experienced by black women.

And sexism there is, in abundance. But I had a glimpse of an acceptance of women’s bodies that is denied in my own culture, with its eating disorders and anxieties.

Maybe it is an acceptance that is increasingly lost through consumerism.

In this way, culture both opens some spaces for living our lives in a fully human way, and closes others.

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