

Identity does not depend on race

WHO are we? is the question posed in a timely series presented by the Cape Times and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Really, it's incredible. If "I am because we are" and we are not the "we" we thought we were – then who am I? If "a person is a person through other people", and we're not getting through to each other – then what am I?



MOMENT IN HISTORY: In order to grapple with difficult conditions, we must draw on our own set of skills, understanding and wisdom, says the writer.

Rather than reach immediately for an answer to this terribly urgent question, perhaps we should slow down enough to reconsider it. Or, as Njabulo Ndebele beautifully suggested recently, to "wake up and redream" ourselves. It does stir us up. Whoever and whatever else we may be, we are the ones in question. We are called to account for ourselves, as if everything depends on this, our moment in history. It's the new Senzenina. It's terrifying and exhilarating. Who are we? It's an open question. You can walk right in. (Just leave the door open behind you, thanks.) It's already crowded and noisy here, heated with opinions, ideas, critiques and proposals for "the way going forward".

This is the national question. It's all of us living here, the inaugural generations of a democratic South Africa. "Inaugural" is a good word; it refers back to Roman times, when a court official – an augur – would interpret omens from the flights of birds. Do we augur well for the future? Do the gods and the ancestors still favour us? And what exactly is being asked? It's not an empirical question; StatsSA can't deliver us. Although the answer (the way forward!) will have to deal with material facts, the plaintiveness of the question comes from something more elusive. Something about recognition and home and belonging and the meaning of our freedom. Who are we? means can we live here together in peace?

What is the setting? Narrowly, South Africa after 17 years of democracy. By the expanded definition: South Africa after 17 years of democracy, following 50 years of apartheid and longer ages of war, slavery, oppression and resistance.

Looking further out, we find ourselves in an apparent opening in history, a moment of crisis for the natural order and its populations, but also perhaps for the prevailing order of power. Beneath the pervasive torpor of globalised capitalism, the ground begins to shift. It's a very potent, genuine situation that calls for a skilful response.

Who are we? means what must we do? And if not now, then when?

But something odd occurs when this question is taken up in public conversations. It has happened in this series. Its logo asks, "Who are we?" and the subheader is "Race and Identity". The series has in fact been consistently referred to as "the series on race and identity".

This assumption – that the question of national identity must be answered in terms of race – prematurely shuts down the space the question is trying to open. I have a nagging sense that we've set the cart before the horse, that the tail is wagging the dog and we're off on the wrong foot or otherwise hobbled before we've even begun.

Coming back to the question, I see another "we" concealed behind it. Who is asking? Not every South African finds the issue so riveting. This "we" is a subset, a fraction of the whole. We who want to understand. We who had great dreams for this new South Africa and are dismayed (shocked, enraged) by such levels of poverty, unemployment, looting and violence. Who are we? means we do not recognise ourselves and this is not the way things were supposed to be.

The question itself draws us together. Look around. Every demographic is represented here, every shade of skin, every mother tongue, faith, gender, age group and social class. What we share is not captured by any category or classification, not by birth or blood. What we share is a commitment and an obligation to the dignity of others and the indivisibility of freedom. We don't even have a common interest, in the usual sense of seeking advantage. (Although, in that sense, we certainly do have conflicting interests: politics is still necessary.)

Consider us the people of the question. The question of national identity – who are we? – conveys to us our sense of responsibility, our freedom and our uncertainty. From the first it identifies us as, and calls us to be, persons who are reliable, sovereign and modest. (I can't say if I'm part of this "us": surely not all the time, as much as I'd like to be.) This community is porous and dynamic. It shrinks in times of confusion and also, happily, in times of peace. It develops in the necessary work of justice and redress. This is where race and culture take on another significance: as resources, what we bring to the work that needs to be done. In order to grapple with difficult conditions, we must draw on our own set of skills, experiences, understanding and wisdom. Inevitably, these are coloured by race – both as cultural expressions of "how we do things" and as socio-political consequences of centuries of racist injustice. The same is true for our markings of gender or language or birthplace, and all their many combinations and permutations. These are the cards we've been dealt. How we play them is our choice and our freedom. Or, to change the metaphor, consider the torn and unravelling social fabric of South Africa. The needle to mend it is justice. Our identities, in all their varied colours and textures, are fibres of the thread that passes through the needle's eye. Thread and needle have to work together; neither can go it alone. And like dogs and tails and horses and carts, they have to work in the proper order. Thread can't take the lead. A primary concern for social justice calls us together. A primary concern with race will only ever divide us.

This produces a robust version of our nation's motto, "unity in diversity" (! ke e: ?xarra ?ke). When we come together with all of who we are to make "a home for all", our differences are no longer either a misfortune or a threat. They are the assets we bring to the table – or choose to leave at the door – as needed. This can be very simple. You see it every day, in small moments and large. Kindness, humour, acknowledgement, courage. As Fanie du Toit wrote in his introduction to this series, "Many ordinary South Africans have... experienced profound and positive changes in racial relations." We must not downplay the significance of this. This view also gives us better sight of who and what is against us. It's not white people or black people or the government or the media or any other group you might name. It's certainly not the constitution. We can identify the adversary as "corruption" in the broadest sense of the word: as moral breakdown, dereliction of duty or abuse of power. (In this sense, racism is a particularly ugly and intransigent corruption of our humanity.) And the parade of the corrupt in the new South Africa is as multi-hued as the ranks of the virtuous. Greed and neglect have also been democratised. There are angels and devils in every segment of society, and in each one of us. Who are we? Every generation of the liberation struggle has had to engage with the national question. Now it's our turn and ultimately we will be known by what we leave behind. Will we come together, effectively and in good time, for justice and reconciliation? I honestly don't know. But the question brings me to the same conclusion as Professor Ndebele: our salvation might well lie

in our subjectivity (maybe it's just sleeping): "the elemental site of our conscience, our moral sensitivity, ethical awareness, and our self-esteem... the most precious source of our future citizenship."

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