

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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 The Cape Coloreds, Part I:
 Development, 1652-1954

c/o J. M. Pennington
 5, Elm Street,
 Houghton, Johannesburg
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
 Institute of Current World Affairs
 522 Fifth Avenue,
 New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

During the month I spent in the Cape Province, I found myself sitting in the living room of a doctor discussing the effectiveness of terrorism; in the office of another doctor discussing the possibilities of armed revolution; in the home of a high school principal discussing means of violating the liquor laws; and in the dining room of a Cape Town City Councillor named a few days before as a Communist discussing poverty and starvation. All these people had a significant thing in common--they were Colored and were considered, not only by themselves, political and social leaders of various segments of the Cape Colored Community.

All of them had a significant thing to say--that in the past six or seven years they have found themselves allying themselves, not with white South Africans as Colored men in the Cape have done for the past 300 years, but with non-white groups--Africans and Indians. And, perhaps even more significant, they have found themselves welcomed on several occasions by Africans and Indians as potential partners and/or leaders in a growing Non-European move to combat apartheid.

To understand the importance of this change in traditional racial alignments of the Cape Province, it is necessary to know something of the history of the Cape Coloreds. As is implied in the name given them, they are a people resulting from racial mixtures, both in the early days of South Africa and recently. They are originally descended (a) from the East African and Asiatic slaves brought to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company when Cape Town was a victualing station for its ships traveling from Europe to the Far East; (b) from the Hottentots and Bushmen who inhabited the Cape Province when Van Riebeck arrived to set up the first victualing station; and (c) from the Europeans with Van Riebeck who suffered from a lack of white women.

More recently there have been crosses between Europeans and Africans, Africans and Coloreds, Europeans and Indians, etc., which have mixed with the original Cape Coloreds to produce individuals of almost untraceable origin but with the distinguishing characteristic of a skin ranging from black to white through all possible gradations of color.

In 1951 there were 1,078,621 Coloreds in South Africa, 8.7 per cent of the total population of 12,437,227 and 41.6 per cent of the 2,588,933 Europeans. About 90 per cent of the South African Colored population lives in the Cape Province.

In the early days, the Cape Coloreds formed a closely-knit community with the Europeans who had annexed all the desirable land. They were, as they are now, Labor with a capital "L." Their original cultural traits soon disappeared, however, and they adopted the language and social customs of their European employers and owners. In those days there was no hard and inflexible prejudice against color among the Dutch settlers. I. D. MacCrone, in his book Race Attitudes in South Africa (Oxford, 1937), pointed out that the social event of the year 1664 was the marriage between

Dutch East India Company Surgeon Pieter van Meerhoff and a Hottentot woman, Eva.¹

Social and economic distinctions grew up fast, however, and since these distinctions could be pinned to a physical characteristic, skin color, they quickly became racial distinctions and a color bar grew up. The Coloreds themselves became color conscious and even today a light-skinned colored person ranks higher, socially, than one with a skin of a darker shade.

The British, who took over the administration of the Cape in the early 18th century, changed many aspects of the color bar. In 1828 they relieved the Hottentots of pass restrictions which had bound them to their employers like medieval serfs and, in 1834, they emancipated the slaves. It was the beginning of the Cape Liberal Tradition and was an immediate cause of the Great Trek by the Dutch Settlers--they moved north to get away from the breakdown of racial barriers and to find a fresh supply of dark-skinned labor.²

The British did not stop there, however. In 1836, they established an elected municipal board for Cape Town. No mention was made of skin color in the franchise qualifications, based mainly on property ownership. And, after 1846, when it was decided in England that the Cape Colony should be permitted to set up representative bodies for local government, it was with the understanding that there should be no political discrimination against Colored people. A constitution was approved in 1853 which entitled any man to register as a voter and stand for election if he earned £50 a year or if he earned £25 a year and was supplied with board and lodging with a combined value of £25.

Later voting laws changed in content, but not in principle. Most changes were aimed at keeping Africans off the voters' roll and the only one to affect Coloreds was that of 1892 in which the economic qualifications were stiffened and a voter was required to be able to sign his name and write his address and occupation.³

Since then the only change that has been made in the political rights of the Cape Coloreds is the provision in the Act establishing the Union of South Africa limiting membership of both Houses of Parliament to Europeans. The Colored franchise was protected by the so-called "entrenched clauses" in the Act which can only be changed by a two-thirds majority of both houses of the South African Parliament meeting jointly.

The Colored people of the Cape Province, therefore, have had the vote since 1853--for more than 100 years. For more than half of those 100 years they had the right to elect other Coloreds to the Cape Parliament. The interesting fact is that they never did and, more important, they never have taken any particular interest in registering and voting.

At the time of Union, after 1910, for example, the Colored people had less than 11 per cent of the combined European and Colored votes in the Cape, although they formed 44 per cent of the population. Today, the difference is even more startling. Coloreds total 49 per cent of the total Cape population (excluding Africans), but make up only 8 per cent of the Cape voters' roll.

1. It was pointed out to me by Afrikaner Nationalists at Stellenbosch that this particular marriage was a failure--Eva ran away to eventually rejoin her tribe.
2. The latter part of this statement was emphatically denied by members of Sabra, the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs, which dictates Afrikaner policy.
3. Thompson, L. M.; The Cape Coloured Franchise; Institute of Race Relations, 1949.

An apparent explanation would be that the Coloreds do not understand democratic processes--that their absence from the polls was and is caused by ignorance and apathy. Apathy, perhaps, but after 300 years of watching European elections, it is hard to believe that even the most backward Colored man does not know what it means to vote. It is more likely, as Marais¹ says in The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937 (Longmans, 1939), because they "were so much an adjunct of European society, a sort of poor relation, and had accepted leadership so long that it did not occur to them to stand on their own feet politically." The fact that, since the elimination of Hottentot pass laws and the emancipation of the slaves, they had not been politically ill-treated by their government on racial grounds must have had something to do with it also.

Dr. O. D. Wollheim, Warden of CAFDA, the Cape Flats Distress Association, agrees with Marais. He is the organizational brain behind CAFDA, a social service organization set up to help shanty-dwelling Coloreds lift their heads above the shifting sand dunes on which their patchwork hovels are built. In his plywood-paneled office over the gateway to his collection of stores, workshops and community services he read from a paper he has prepared for the South African Institute of Race Relations.

"The Cape Colored people . . . have at no period of their existence been separated from the White people, originated in White society, and whatever patterns of life they have developed have been derived from White people. It is therefore fallacious to consider any social adjustments of the Cape Colored people as a process distinguishable in any way from that of Europeans. The social patterns of the Colored people have at all times been those of the Europeans with whom they have been in contact. In the rural areas their social patterns have been those of the bywoner (tenant farmer) and the poorer farming population, in the urban areas those of the working class and artisan." He put down the paper.

"You must understand," he said, taking off his glasses, "that the Colored person has no other culture and way of life except a European culture. There are a few Cape Malays who are still Moslems, but even they are European except for their religion. It's only recently that they have been forced to feel different.

"When I was a little boy in Salt River," he went on, walking over to a map on the wall and pointing to a Cape Town suburb, "there were seven houses along this block." He followed a blue line with his fingernail. "We lived on the corner--spoke Afrikaans and had a normal kind of home. Next door to us was a Colored family, also speaking Afrikaans. On the other side was another Colored family. Then there were two European homes, another Colored family and another European family.

"It wasn't that we were living in the slums--nothing like it. It was just that our families were all earning about the same amount of money and speaking the same language so it was natural that we should all live where we did. All of the children--me included--played together in lots behind the houses. We went to different schools, to be sure, but we learned pretty much the same thing. Of course, my mother and father never had the Colored parents to dinner or anything like that. But we didn't feel that we were being contaminated living next door to Colored people."

1. J. S. Marais, Professor of History, University of the Witwatersrand.

Residentially, the position has not changed much for today's Coloreds except that overcrowding, caused by the current industrial revolution, has forced them into shacks on the Cape Flats. They still live in the suburbs stretching south from Cape Town (Salt River, Rondebosch, Wynberg, Newlands, Observatory, Mowbray), side by side with Europeans in conditions based on income, not race. Their home language is Afrikaans, with a smattering of English. They belong to sporting clubs, social clubs, singing clubs and church groups. They ride with Europeans in Cape Town's bus service. They are, as must be expected, still considered socially inferior to Europeans and this is reflected in the fact that it is the Coloreds who are well-off who live in the suburbs while their European next-door-neighbors come from European lower and lower middle income groups.

Economically, the Coloreds are definitely inferior. Twenty-eight per cent of them are still farming, working on European farms in the western Cape Province. Twenty-two per cent work in manufacturing industries in and around Cape Town. Twenty-one per cent work as domestic servants for Europeans and the rest are scattered through transport (drivers), commerce (typists and clerks), public administration, defence and the professions.

They are not so badly off as the Africans, who are still largely confined to unskilled drudge work in the Cape Province. Coloreds occupy what might be called an intermediate position--they hold jobs calling for skill and semi-skill but are seldom found in a supervisory or executive post. In the early days of the Cape Colony the slaves from Asia were usually of a high cultural level and were called upon to serve as masons, bricklayers, painters and furniture makers. They still hold many of the skilled jobs in the older trades. They belong to well-organized trade unions, but are not paid on the basis of "equal pay for equal work."

Their low per capita income is reflected in the serious lack of housing and the slum conditions which exist for approximately 53 per cent of the Colored community. In older sections of Cape Town families of 5 and 6 are forced to occupy single rooms and on the Cape Flats the overflow of the Colored population has been forced to live in shacks made of corrugated iron, packing cases and whatever else families can lay their hands on. Public housing has not been able to keep up with the great number of Coloreds who have left the farms to take advantage of jobs in new industry in Cape Town.

Education is on a catch-as-catch-can basis because of poverty, inadequate school facilities and the necessity for young boys and girls to get out and earn some money to help keep the family head above water. Colored pupils are often hard to teach, according to Wollheim, for reasons ranging from inferior nutrition to a stultifying cultural environment. They must wait longer to enter school because of overcrowding. Once there, they suffer from a lack of books, teachers, equipment--and must be taught at the level of the slowest students, which is pretty slow because of the absence of any special schools for mentally deficient or retarded children.

Free schooling exists on a non-compulsory basis only up to the eighth grade. From then on the student must provide 60 per cent of the cost of his education until he graduates from high school. And, although numbers of European and Colored children are approximately equal, there are only 18 secondary schools for Coloreds, as compared with 240 secondary schools for European children.

In spite of his inferior economic and social status, the Colored community has traditionally felt more akin to Europeans than to Africans and Indians. A strong reason for this is the fact that, by intermarriage, many of them are akin to Europeans. An even more important reason is the fact that the Colored community is not static. There is constant change within it--African men, in order to avoid payment of bride-price which are inevitable if they marry African women, are anxious to marry Colored women whose fathers are more than often glad to get rid of an extra mouth. And the natural tendency, after generations of continued mixture with "white" blood, is for a few Coloreds in each generation to "pass" as white.

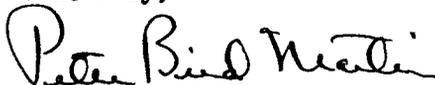
Thus a Colored person has always been able to look forward to the day when his grandchildren or great-grandchildren would be able to forget their dark past and become Europeans. The Coloreds, after generations of looking "down" on Africans and "up" to Europeans, naturally grew more firmly attached to the upper group.

Europeans helped this process by making it clear to the Coloreds that they were considered much superior to Africans and were a higher order of human beings. Many Cape Colored people can trace themselves back to entries in old Cape Bibles registering the births of children sired by respected Dutch and English patriarchs and borne by Malay slaves or Hottentot servants. Europeans have traditionally felt responsible for the very existence of a Colored community.

In view of this, it came as a surprise to find the leaders of the Colored community so quick to tell an outsider that in recent years they have found it impossible to think of themselves as tradition-bound to Europeans; that they felt their future lay with the Indians and Africans.

Colored men, for the most part, have absorbed western techniques and ideas. They could be effective as leaders of a possible anti-white underground organization. Until a few years ago, custom prevented them from following such a course. The picture, however, seems to have changed. The reasons for the change are a bit hard to pin down. I will outline some of them in Part II.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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