

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-8
The Problem of Fitting People
to Words

March 21, 1962
29 Bay View Avenue
Tamboer's Kloof
Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

One of the difficulties in writing about South Africa is purely semantic; it is not always clear what racial term should be used.

A White inhabitant of South Africa, for instance, is not a "Native" or an "African" but a "European". On the other hand a "Native" of South Africa may be called an "African" but not a "South African". A "South African" is a "European".

An Afrikaans-speaking South African is an "Afrikaner", a word which means "African" in English. The Afrikaner therefore objects to the term "African" when it is applied to the Black man. However, when he thinks of G. Mennen Williams' statement about "Africa for the Africans" he doesn't recognize his inclusion as an "African" but interprets the statement as applying only to "Natives".

What can you call a Black South African?

The Black South African prefers to be called an "African".

For over two centuries he was known to the White man as a "Kaffir", a term derived from an Arabic word meaning "non-believer". This has come to have the same connotation as "nigger" in America.

A few years ago most of the leading English language newspapers adopted the policy of using "African" when referring to the Black man. The Nationalist Press uses "Bantu" and "Native" interchangeably.

The Nationalist Government prefers the term "Bantu", an academic term designating a whole family of African languages (some 250 in all) in which it is the word for "people". It has been officially defined as being the same as "Native" and the Government uses the words interchangeably in official documents.

United Party members prefer "Native" although some of them will use "African" on occasion. (One MP explained that he uses "Native" when speaking to White audiences, and "African" when speaking to "Natives"). They claim "Native" is the only universally understood term and that the word "Bantu" is meaningless. They like an anecdote about an American professor who wrote a letter to a friend here saying that he was pleased to hear about all that was being done for the Bantu, "but what about the unfortunate Africans?"

Progressives and Liberals use "African" knowing that Africans feel other terms are derogatory. They would prefer, however, to use "African" and "South African" inclusively, to refer to both the Black and the White man.

And what do the laws say?

In May, 1957, Dr. Donges, then Minister of the Interior, admitted that his special inter-departmental committee, after 2½ years of study, had failed to standardize the varying race definitions found in South African legislation. Things seem no better now.

A "Native", according to the Urban Areas Act and the Native Building Workers Act, is a member of an aboriginal race or tribe of Africa and nothing more or less. Yet the Population Registration Act adds that it can also include anyone who is "accepted as such". That is, a Coloured person who is not a member of an aboriginal race might be defined as a "Native" if by his associations and appearance he has become "accepted as such". The Representation of Natives Act includes in its definition the child or grandchild of a member of an aboriginal race or tribe. Thus a Coloured person could also be a "Native" if one of his grandparents had been one, even if he wasn't so accepted.

A "European", according to the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, is anyone who "obviously looks like one". This presents no problem except to those Europeans whose dark complexions may make them appear as something other than White, and to those Coloured people whose light skins may indicate they are "European". The Group Areas Act and the Population Registration Act, both passed in 1950, tried to clarify the previous definition by stating that a "European" is anyone who obviously looks like one or is accepted as one, with the exception of anyone who may look like a European but who is accepted as a "Coloured". An "obviously" European could be classed as a "Coloured" if he habitually consorted with people in that group; in the same way a Coloured could be classified as a "European".

A "Coloured" person, according to the Natives Urban Act, is one of mixed European and Native descent. However, the

Group Areas Act broadens the definition to include anyone who is not "European" or "Native". By this act and its amendments there are today at least seven kinds of definable "Coloureds": "Cape Coloureds", "Malays", "Griquas", "Chinese", "Indian", "Other Asiatics" and "Other Coloureds". These categories may confuse the outsider. There is certainly every evidence that the Government has had its own troubles in applying them to people.

For example, the Griquas of the Northern Cape, who have mixed White, Hottentot, Bushman and African blood, have over the years developed into a distinctive group speaking a language more or less common only to themselves. Under earlier legislation they were considered "Coloured" but a few years ago they were classified as "Native" under the application of the Population Registration Act, placing them in two categories at the same time. This was a serious matter: as "Natives" they would have to carry passes; they would be unable to travel as freely as if they were "Coloured"; their children would have to go to "Bantu schools" and learn a "Bantu" language; certain jobs would become more difficult to get and their salaries and old age benefits would become appreciably lower as "Natives". They appealed, and they are now defined as a separate group under "Coloureds" in all legislative acts.

Another group who have taxed the Government's race defining powers have been the Arabs from Zanzibar who settled on the Bluff in Durban some 70 years ago. Initially they were defined as "Natives", and when they protested it appeared that they would be redefined as "Coloureds". Then it was discovered that they were living in an area allocated by the Group Areas Board to the Indians. The Arabs, not wanting to be classified as "Indians", requested permission to stay there as "Coloureds". However, the local Coloured community objected. Finally, and no doubt hopefully, the Government settled the problem by defining them as "Other Asiatics".

Until recently the Japanese have also been defined as "Other Asiatics" under "Coloureds". "Other Asiatics" has been defined as covering "any person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of a race or tribe whose national home is in any country or area in Asia other than China, India or Pakistan." Just recently the Government announced that, except for the population census, the Japanese will be considered as "European" and are entitled to all White privileges. Chinese, meanwhile, except for those with diplomatic cards, are still defined as "Chinese" under "Coloured".

The basis for this redefinition seems to be wholly economic. South Africa has just entered into valuable trade agreements with Japan regarding pig iron and wool, and several Nationalists have pointed out that it would be embarrassing for

Japanese business representatives to be treated as non-Whites. The transfer of the Japanese to European status has been termed by an Opposition Senator as "incanescence - the process of turning somebody or something white". "As a matter of fact," he concludes, "all you need to become a White man in South Africa is to buy enough pig iron."

It looks like wool might help too. The head of the South African Wool Board announced the other day that a pending trade agreement with Red China might be helped if Chinese could also be considered as "European". This may be a bit harder to accomplish. There is no fear of the Japanese as a group in South Africa; there are less than 100 of them in the country and they have no vote. There are 6000 Chinese.

These switches in racial definition and the whole Coloured-Oriental-European problem has provided no end of embarrassment for the Government. In just the last few weeks several cases have come up centering on race classification decisions, all of which have contributed heavily to the bad impression abroad which this country would like to overcome.

The Singhs and the Songs

A few days ago Mr. David Song became the first Chinese in South Africa to be defined as "European". His wife, however, has not been reclassified. The question arises as to whether he can now live with her, a "Chinese Coloured", without contravening the Immorality Act.

At one time the wife in a mixed marriage automatically assumed the same race as her husband. This has been nullified by the Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act which have made it illegal for people of different races to marry or to live together.

Mr. and Mrs. Singh were recently arrested under the Immorality



CHINESE WHITE: Mr. David Song, a Durban business man, who has been classified as White by the Race Classification Board after a six-month legal battle. He said yesterday: "It is better to be White in South Africa."



★ "Chinese is made White man? As Confucius say, 'Well, that's the mysterious, inscrutable West for you'."

Act because Mr. Singh was an "Indian" and Mrs. Singh, a "European". They had been married in Rhodesia to avoid the Mixed Marriages Act. Though Mrs. Singh now wears a sari and is accepted as an Indian she is still considered a "European" by the court, which failed in its initial prosecution. However, since South Africa doesn't recognize their marriage they will continue to live in jeopardy as long as they stay in this country.

Another problem peripheral to this one is faced by members of the various school boards who, because schools must be racially segregated, have to deal with dozens of school admission cases where the race of a child is in question. They have found no valid definition on which to base their decisions since the race classification of the parents cannot be relied on in deciding on the race of the child. As a currently popular limerick goes:

"If Mrs. Singh married Mr. Song
Would their children be White
Or would they be Wong?"

If they lived in South Africa, it might some day have to be decided by a school board.

Mrs. Catherine Taylor, member of the Cape Provincial Council, brought up the problem last week with the Cape Administrator. "Surely children of school-going age who share the same place in society are entitled to the same classification as

their parents? Or are we going to divide brother from sister, child from parent in this wretched witch-hunt?.....How do we classify a child? Or is the department going to assume that every child is illegitimate?" To which the Administrator replied "A neighbor might have visited the house."

And how can the common man keep abreast of the latest classifications?

A few weeks ago the Management Committee of the Pretoria City Council refused a visiting Japanese swimming team permission to use a municipal "for Whites only" pool for a swimming demonstration. A few days later the Committee reversed the decision, having in the meantime been informed by the Government that it was serious in its insistence that Japanese be treated as Whites.



The
visiting
swimming
team
arriving at
the
Cape Town
airport

Not long afterward, the driver of a "Whites only" bus in Pretoria refused to pick up a Japanese because he thought the man was Chinese. It would perhaps have gone unnoticed except that the man was a consular official and lodged a protest. The driver and his colleagues appeared perplexed about the whole thing. One of them said, "The Bus Company has told us that Chinese cannot travel in the buses. They have also told us that both Japanese and Chinese consular officials can. But who are we to say when a man is a genuine consular official? And who are we to say that a man is a Japanese and not a Chinese?"

A pretty good question.

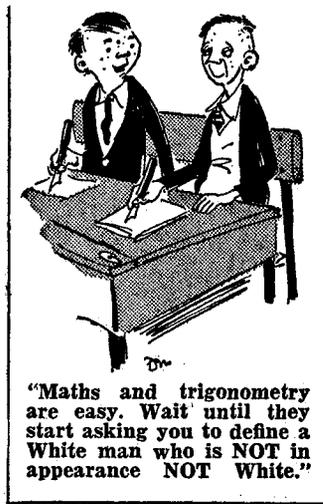
Sincerely yours,

James C. Brewer
James C. Brewer

Cartoons through the courtesy of the Cape Times
Photographs through the courtesty of Die Burger and the Cape Argus

P.S. Today in Parliament the Minister of the Interior introduced the proposed Population Registration Amendment Bill with a more complete definition of a "White person":

"White person means a person who -- (a) in appearance obviously is a White person and who is not generally accepted as a Coloured person; or (b) is generally accepted as a White person and is NOT in appearance obviously NOT a White Person, but does not include any person who admits that he is by descent a Native or a Coloured person."



J. B.

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