

THE “COLORED” PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

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When I checked into my hotel in Cape Town, South Africa for a five-day stay last September, I noticed that the lady at the desk was Indian. Under the old apartheid system, I assumed she would have been classified as Indian along with her 1.8 million compatriots. White South Africans used to curse them as “coolies,” forced them to live in separate townships, limited their travel, and offered their children an inferior education.

In 1860 their great grandparents disembarked at the port of Durban to work as lifetime indentured laborers in the sugar fields of Natal. Although at first Gandhi ignored them in favor of the middle class Indians he worked for, he eventually had his best success with these workers, who were terribly oppressed and had very little to lose.

When I talked to my guide about my observation about the hotel clerk, he corrected me. He said that she was Cape Malay, a term used to describe the 200,000 descendants of the slaves that the Dutch had brought from Southeast Asia (mainly Indonesia) starting in the 17th Century. Cape Malay music is described as “emotional” and “sad,” reminding one of the American Negro spirituals.

Indians had lived in Southeast Asia for centuries and they had kept their own dress, customs, and religions--Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Most of the Cape Malays, however, are Muslim. One of my drivers was a Cape Malay who, after dropping me off, was very much looking forward to breaking his Ramadan fast.

When the Dutch landed on the Cape in 1652, they found that the native Africans were very reluctant slaves. The Spaniards had the same

experience with New World Indians, so they started importing slaves from West Africa. The Dutch looked to their East Asian possessions for more reliable servants.

Under apartheid Cape Malays were classified as “colored,” a racial term used to identify all people of mixed race. So, even though I was right that the hotel clerk was indeed of Indian descent, the irrational apartheid system separated her from her compatriots who came directly from India.

In addition to the Cape Malays, there are colored people who are a mixture of British and Zulu. There are also those from the sexual encounters between the British and the natives of present day Zimbabwe. Proudly white Afrikaner pioneers also seduced KhoiSan women, better known as the Bushmen of Botswana and present day Namibia. The colored people of Southern Africa are the most genetically diverse people in the world.

It is supremely ironic that the racial ideology of the European colonists considered race mixing a great crime, but the temptations of easy conquest and control must have been overwhelming. The Dutch Reformed Church was especially emphatic about the sin of miscegenation, but one of the largest number of coloreds comes from the inbreeding of Calvinist Afrikaners and the KhoiSan tribes. Although they were quite good at producing them, the male leaders of the Afrikaner Transvaal Republic would not allow any bastard “up to the tenth generation to sit in its meetings as a member or judge.”

Today the coloreds make up 10 percent of South Africa’s population, about 4 million people. Because of the influence of British and Dutch missionaries, 80 percent of the coloreds are Christian while 5 percent are Muslim.

I was amazed to learn 90 percent of the coloreds speak Afrikaans, the language of apartheid and the Dutch settlers. My initial shock turned to embarrassment when my guide asked me if English-speaking American blacks and Indians believe that they are speaking the “language of the oppressor.” Even a good number of blacks speak Afrikaans, because they parents lost their native tongues working in white households over many generations.

One evening our tour group enjoyed a delicious meal at the home of a colored family. Their English was perfect, but their first language was Afrikaans. They had a Spanish surname and, incredibly enough, their ancestors were brought to South Africa as slaves from the Philippines.

We must remember that the Dutch traded as far north as Japan, but they did not, interestingly enough, bring back slaves from Nipponese shores. Did the Dutch respect the Japanese more than other Asians? My research has revealed that the Dutch respected the Chinese and Arabs as fellow traders and they trafficked in slaves as well.

My guide was colored and he freely shared his family history. His father was German and his mother was black African. He and his sister were registered as colored when they were born, but his father managed to get his younger twin brothers registered as white. Under apartheid the rights of these two sets of siblings were dramatically different.

On our tour to the Cape of Good Hope, we passed by the University of Cape Town. My guide swore under his breath about the day that he tried and failed to matriculate at what was then a whites-only institution. (His younger brothers graduated from this institution.) He came to the U.S. and received a degree at New York University instead. He and his attorney wife now have a ten-room house on the bay; his children are attending a top prep school; and he had just bought a new Volvo.

Under British rule the coloreds enjoyed the right to vote in the Western Cape until 1930. After that they could only elect white candidates who would represent their interests. When the Nationalist Party, whose members were sympathetic to Nazi Germany, took over in 1948 the rights of coloreds were further restricted. They became major players in the anti-apartheid campaign.

At least the coloreds did not have to carry the identity cards that blacks did. Fortunately for them, the coloreds were still considered South African citizens, but blacks were citizens only in their artificial "homelands," sometimes hundreds of miles from where the black males could find work.

In 1966 District Six in central Cape Town was declared a white's only area and all non-white people--mostly colored--were forced to move to

segregated townships 20 miles outside the city. During my stay in Cape Town, I visited the museum for District Six, which has been compared to the French Quarter of New Orleans. Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindus of all races enjoyed jazz together and celebrated each other's holidays.

At the museum I met a colored Muslim man who had written a poignant account of his life there and the agony of his family's removal. There were pictures in the book from Carnival, the District's favorite holiday just as it is in New Orleans. Some of the musicians looked as if they were made up in "black face." "Were the coloreds of District Six making fun of blacks?" I asked. The author quickly explained that the colors of the face paint varied from group to group, and it was not an attempt to look like a black person.

Protests and technicalities slowed the exodus from District Six, but in the end 60,000 people were forced out. Except for the original churches and mosques, District Six, renamed Zonnebloem (Afrikaans for "blooming zone"), now lies empty except for a new technical university on its edge. It is essentially a land of shame that whites and certainly international companies are loath to develop. Ironically, District Six will eventually bloom again with the return of many of the families who were ruthlessly uprooted from their homes.

As we continue to celebrate Martin Luther King this month, let us honor the brave South African freedom fighters, catalyzed by American activists but who were also an inspiration to them in return. We remember especially South African President Nelson Mandela, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the Rev. Allan Boesak, the famous colored theologian who refused to give up his Dutch Reformed faith even though its leaders had discriminated against him.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read all the columns from his Africa trip at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/Africa.htm