

**CREATING ETHNICITY
IN THE
BRITISH COLONIAL CAPE: COLOURED AND MALAY CONTRASTED.**

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It is my intention in this paper to show how the category of "Coloured" was created during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under British colonial rule at the Cape with "Malay" as a problematic sub-set of Coloured. I shall trace the way in which "Coloured" arose as a miscellaneous category out of the difficulty British administrators found in trying to classify a substantial population that did not fit easily into a race group. I argue that the process by which this category was created and imposed upon a population group has been used by people to whom it has been applied as a means of political resistance.

The category of "Malay" is contrasted with Coloured in the way in which the people so classified responded to that label. Like Coloured, Malay was a problem category for British administrators, but in this case it was because Malays were perceived as a population group which derived from the pre-colonial slave period and which, by the nineteenth century, was becoming culturally eroded and too racially mixed to be clearly identifiable, except by religion (as Moslem¹). In this case the Malays themselves built up an ethnic identity and proudly called themselves Malay as a means of protecting themselves against outside hostility. Malay ethnicity continued to serve its purpose until the 1970s when liberal-minded Whites began to take more interest in Malay culture and traditions. At this point educated Muslims (*sic*) took the lead in decrying cultural ethnicity and insisting that they were Muslim, not Malay.

Background: Questions of Ethnicity Posed during Fieldwork in Capetown, 1976-8

Questions of Coloured and Malay ethnicity were of much relevance to people living in District Six (or what remained of it) when I lived there for two years in the 1970s. There was a discernible difference in understanding between the way in which people there thought about these ethnicities and the way English liberal Whites in Cape Town understood them at that time.

(1) In District Six

(a) Coloured

Living in District Six, I became aware that people used coded language to say something about personal and group identity. They often deliberately avoided the term "Coloured" to describe themselves and friends (though not always everyone else in the community), but, in talking of "us" or "our type of people", they indicated a sense of group consciousness. When a third person was referred to whose identity was not obvious from the context of the conversation, that person's classification would be indicated obliquely by stating, for example, where he or she had been to school or where that person lived. On one occasion this was made obvious when, soon after I arrived, a Moslem woman was talking of a friend and said, "she lives in Bonteheuwel". Then, in case I had not taken the point, she told me: Bonteheuwel is a Coloured township". In this way, she had not herself described her friend as Coloured but she had told me how White South Africans defined her. It was important for District Six people to know how another person was defined (especially where that person was a borderline case) as this would affect the way they would relate to that person.

Sometimes, if I raised the subject of ethnicity, people did say outright, "Coloured is an apartheid term". Certainly apartheid contributed to its unacceptability, but I suspect that the rejection of "Coloured" went back well before the 1950 Population Registration Act. Established townspeople in District Six often identified rural immigrants by whether or not they called themselves "Coloured", and thereby accepted themselves as White South Africans defined them; the latter were derided for bringing a *ja baas* mentality with them. The urbanized District Sixer rejected "Coloured" as a label for two quite different reasons; (1) because of its political unacceptability as a term imposed upon them by Whites which was not of their choosing, and (2) as a derogatory term which made them feel inferior to Whites.

The same people used "Coloured" to describe those they considered inferior to themselves. In a community where, for example, people distinguished themselves as *die Christe mense* and *die Slams*, each described the other as "the real Coloureds".

Up the road in Walmer Estate, an elite area that some sardonically called "Black Sea Point", there were some who had been exposed to the thinking of the Non-European Unity Movement (sometimes just through secondary school teachers) and explicitly rejected "Coloured" (always with inverted commas) as an artificial category imposed upon them by Whites. Here "Coloured" was explicitly recognized as more than "an apartheid term": it was a race and social category that White South Africans, Afrikaner and English-speaking, had been responsible for creating.

In District Six, where the rejection of an ethnic label was more subtle, people often *did* refer to themselves as Coloured when talking to Whites and adapted themselves to White South African thinking. Although they did not adhere to formalized NEUM principles on this matter, there appeared to be an implicit tradition of rejection of Coloured ethnicity. People often used to say, "we are just human beings; we are all South Africans", appealing on the one hand to their individualism, and on the other to their oneness as South Africans.

(b) *Malay*

Among the poor of District Six, Moslems proudly called themselves Malay because this made them something more than Coloured and gave them a sense of culture and historical tradition and a separate community within a community. "Malay" was used more or less synonymously with "Moslem". Only if I raised the matter was it agreed that the Malays must have once come from somewhere overseas. It didn't seem to matter: to be Malay now meant to be part of the Moslem community in Cape Town. An outsider who converted to Islam was said to have "turned Malay" and was accepted as such. Blood did not come into it. (Those who expressed the hope that I would become Moslem likewise talked of me "turning Malay"). Indian Muslims were not Malay; they stood outside the Malay community.

During this time, pressure arose from more educated Muslims living outside District Six (in Walmer Estate and other areas) to reject Malay ethnicity and to distinguish the cultural aspects of life from those held to be purely religious. There were various reasons behind this. One was rising economic standards which led the upwardly mobile to associate being Malay with a former state of ignorance and poverty. A second reason had to do with the contemptuous attitude of Indian Muslims towards Malays. This was declining now as intermarriage between the two groups (Indian men with Malay women) was on the increase, but the Malay population was becoming more sensitive to it and more conscious of their weaker connections with the wider Muslim world.

A third reason, particularly relevant here, lay in Muslim reaction to the growing interest among liberal-minded Whites in the traditions of the Cape Malays. I. D. du Plessis's coffee-table book called *The Cape Malays* (1972), which was very popular among English-speaking Whites, and an SABC television programme on *The Cape Malays* shown in 1977 became rallying points in a campaign to get Moslems to become Muslim and to reject Malay identity. Such was the venom against this well-intentioned programme in Cape Town's *Muslim News* that even those most proud of being Malay began to wonder what to call themselves. The danger that the more educated Muslims saw in this new benevolence was one of yet again being defined by Whites, in this case as Malays in traditional nineteenth century mode.

(2) Among English-speaking Whites

In District Six it was apparent that the power of White South Africa took two forms. One was the overt power of White racism, now exhibited in apartheid. This was experienced as an external power that had, in the past two decades, marched into District Six like an invading force: first with the census officials going from door to door collecting information for race classification, then with the 1966 Proclamation of District Six as a White Group Area and the arrival of the bulldozers (which by the mid 1970s had partially destroyed the area).

The second form of power operated from within District Six itself. This came through liberal Whites who, in District Six, were more often described as "European" as distinct from White.

Power was exerted both in the continued physical presence of Europeans as clergy and community workers, in the memory of them in the past, and in the attitudes of "English" cultural superiority they instilled into District Six people. The relationship of patron to protégé, of liberal Whites protecting Coloureds against racist Afrikaners created a relationship of dependence, and also division within the District Six community where status was linked to shades of colour and appropriate behaviour, and associated with the use of the English language and membership of the "English church".

These liberal Whites talked of preferring to see Coloureds as a class rather than a race category. They argued that apartheid had created "Coloured" as an artificial race, imposing boundaries around a miscellaneous population. They cited the 1950 Population Registration Act that defined a "coloured person" as someone who was "not a white-person or a "native" to show that there could be no positive definition of "Coloured". They made much of the impossibility of making any hard and fast division between White and Coloured and of the misery created for families divided by the apartheid line and for individuals classified as Coloured but light enough to pass for White. They mocked the bureaucratic extremes to which the Nationalist government had gone in its race definitions, with seven Coloured groups (laid down by Proclamation in 1959). If Coloured was itself nothing more than a residual category, the sub-set "Other Coloureds" became a residue of the second degree. They argued that people in Cape Town should be allowed to find their own "natural" level.²

These categories, however, far from being Nationalist inventions, were the product of nineteenth century British thinking on race.

The British at the Cape

The race categories used by the Nationalists were adopted from the census categories; these can be traced back through the census reports of the nineteenth century Cape Colony. The first full census of the Cape Colony was made in 1865. In the next section we will look at the way in which the British administration struggled to fit the population of the Cape into its ideas of race and how it had to cope with a large miscellaneous "Other". In this section we look at the nature of the population at the time of British conquest and at the growth of Malay identity.

Cape society, when the British took over, was a society based on slavery. The principal social categories were legal categories: slave-owner and slave. Between the slave-owners and slaves were the free blacks, their number increasing in the late eighteenth century. And there were the Khoi.

Among both the slave-owners and the slaves there appears to have been much diversity of ethnicity, as suggested, for example, in the *Journals* of Andries Sparrman. The British were disturbed by this diversity, at the absence of the neat categories they were used to. Captain Robert Percival, writing in 1804, registered his surprise at a European population that did not fit into discrete units:

Such however has been the influence of the medley of habits, customs, prejudices, and languages, that few retain any distinguishing trait of the country from which they originally sprang; and the whole society requires to be described as a people differing extremely from the natives of any part of Europe. (p 4)

Much later in his report he described the "slaves and people of colour" and tried to classify them:

The different races of slaves and people of colour to be met with at Cape Town, consist in the following classes:- The slaves from Bengal and the Malabar coast. Those of colour, descended from a connection between the Dutch and their slaves or black women. Malays from Batavia and the Eastern islands of India. The Buginese; half Malay and half African; the natives of Madagascar; those of the coast of Guinea, called Caffrees and Africans of the interior part of the Cape of Good Hope; and lastly the Hottentots, the numbers of whom employed here are few; and rarely unmixed, but born of a Hottentot father or mother, and on the otherside a Caffree or Negro. (p 285)

As late as 1861, Lady Duff Gordon, visiting the Cape, commented that this must surely be "the most motley crewe in all the world". By this time the British had set to, busily trying to inventory and classify the people they had come to govern. Most of their attention, however, was given to the Cape interior (a point noted by Percival).

John Barrow (1806), for example, was sent to investigate the native peoples of the interior. And in the 1820s the Bigge and Colebrook Commission of Inquiry, which arrived from London to look into the conditions at the Cape (and in other colonial possessions) had much to say about Africans and Khoi (though the former were mostly on the frontiers of the colony and the latter had to be reconstructed into tribal groups from the past), while it had very little to say about the people of Cape Town. A four-page report on interviews with two Malay *imams* has been seized upon by historians in the past few years for the rarity of its authentic material. The question to be addressed, however, is: why is there so little information? The answer is simple: the British were interested in what they perceived to be the pure primordality of the indigenous people of the colony. In Cape Town and in the Peninsula people were neither pure nor, for the most part, wholly indigenous.

The Malays in particular were foreign bodies, exotica that attracted the eye of the painter, de Meillon, and European tourists (Shell, 1978). They were reckoned to be a population group brought from a particular part of the world who made up one of the three types of slaves that the British inherited from the Dutch. William Wilberforce Bird ranked them between the Afrikanders - identified as light-skinned, trustworthy and making good house servants and stewards - and the negroes - dark-skinned, burly and stupid. His stereotype of the Malays - as good workers, clever and wily - indicated the independent spirit that made them difficult for their masters to control .

Malay Origins

To the British, on their arrival at the Cape, the Malays were a fairly distinct group emanating from somewhere, specified or unspecified, in the East, and now an awkward hangover from the Dutch slave period. As the century progressed, the British would talk more about the Malays as the remnants of what was once a coherent people, who had become racially mixed and culturally eroded over time. Lady Duff Gordon, for example, writes that, apart from the English, the Malays were the only distinct group in Cape Town. She sees this distinctiveness coming from their religion, as the last remaining element of their culture intact, and from their industriousness. J. S. Mason, representing English settler opinion in Cape Town, says much the same. Quoting Andersson's *Explorations*, he writes:

No one can be in Capetown for a single day, without being struck by the infinite variety of the human race encountered in the streets. Indians, Chinese, Malays, Caffers, Bechuanas, Hottentots, Creoles, 'Afrikanders', half-castes of many kinds, negroes of every variety (p 35)

The work of historians over the past couple of decades has begun to give a new perspective on Malay ethnicity. Far from being a racial group eroded by time and exogamous sexual relations by the mid-nineteenth century, the Malays were a group that came into being towards the end of the eighteenth century and built up their cultural identity in the nineteenth century.

The fact that a B.A. Hons. thesis in History at UCT (in 1974) should have caused a stir testifies to the shake-up it gave to long-held assumptions. Robert Shell argued that there had been very little Islam among the slaves on their arrival at the Cape, that the slaves came from a wider area than had hitherto been assumed, and that there was no Malay community in those early years. In 1977, Anna Boeseken's detailed study of slave origins further extended the area of slave origins right across the Indian Ocean. James Armstrong (1979) put greater emphasis on slaves from the east African coast, and Frank Bradlow drew on Boeseken's research to extend our understanding of the heterogeneity of the slaves. Then in 1983, in *Cape of Torments*, Robert Ross argued that there were hindrances to the development of any sense of community until towards the end of the slave period in the late eighteenth century.

It may be that some of these historians have overstated their case. There are some Muslims from Cape Town now beginning to argue the case for a greater continuity of culture through the slave period. But while taking this into account, I think we can accept that there was no single ethnic community, or even a dominant one, during most of the slave period. Certainly in reading Sparrman, or his Swedish compatriot Karl Thurnberg, in the late eighteenth century, we are given no sense of a single slave community, certainly not of a Malay community. In Sparrman, the most striking of the slaves are the Bugis who had gained the reputation for being the bravest in their defiance of their condition as slaves.

The term Malay, we are told by Bradlow, goes back no further than the mid eighteenth century when it came into use not to denote a place of origin but the Malay language as a lingua franca among the slaves. His argument is well made, except for his citing of a Mrs Jemima Kindersley, an English lady writing home from Cape Town in 1765. In checking this reference I found that she does link Malay ethnicity with place of origin and physiognomy:

Some of them [slaves] are called Malay or Malaynese, brought from the country of Malacca, and the islands to the east of India, subject to the Dutch company. These slaves differ from the others in the flatness of their faces, the length of their eyes, and the distance of the eyes from each other; they are likewise less black, but more a pale yellow. (pp 66-67)

It may be that other British would have made similar observations, "Malay" being a more familiar term than many of the others used to describe slave groups. Bradlow may be right in linking the origin of Malay ethnicity to the use of the Malay language in Cape Town in the middle of the century but it is equally possible that the British, arriving at the turn of the century, associated Malay with an assumed place of origin and used it in this context.

Achmat Davids argues that Muslims first came together as an identifiable community in the late eighteenth century with the increasing number of free blacks who were able to move around more freely and to provide homes where Muslims could meet together, and with the work of a charismatic leader, Imam Abdulla Abdus Salaam, popularly known as "Tuan Guru", who became the first *kadi*. By the early nineteenth century a community was developing fast. In 1798 came the first mosque (Auwal Mosque in Bo-Kaap), established in anticipation of the granting of freedom of worship in 1804. And the number of Muslims increased dramatically as freed slaves, many of them migrating into Cape Town from the surrounding countryside, found a new identity for themselves among the Malays.

Davids talks about some of the practices which were to become recognized as Malay traditions deriving from this period. He cites *rampie sny* (for the celebration of Muhammad's birthday) and *merang* (prayer meetings followed by feasting) as examples. We may add to these the traditions that built up around marriages, burials and the preparations for the *hajj*.

While the British may have been principally responsible for establishing "Malay" as a term to describe the Muslim population of the Cape, the Malays themselves did much to promote their cultural identity within a ghettoized community. As a result, the Malays, as descendants of that group of slaves identified by Bird, fared much better than the Afrikaners, if we go by Duff Gordon's observations. Although the Malays were not identified as a separate race group in the first census report of 1865, their conspicuousness ensured that they were incorporated into following censuses as a separate race.

Census Categories and the Formation of a Coloured Population Group

In the first full census of the colony the population was classified in simple terms into two major groups, or "classes": European and Coloured (the Coloured population then being subdivided). "Coloured" here referred to anyone who was not deemed to be European. In Britain (as in the USA) "Coloured" continued to have this meaning into the late 1970s when it was challenged by Black Consciousness. In the Cape, however, its meaning had changed by the early twentieth century to refer to, and to define, people of mixed race. These people were deemed to be forming a new race or "nation". Our purpose here is to follow the construction of this new race as an *administrative*, rather than a natural, process in the census reports of the Cape colony.

The British identified races as natural phenomena to be discovered, just as Sparrman and Thurnberg, students of Linnaeus, identified races in the natural world of flora and fauna. The use of "class" in 1865, and in the following census in 1875, reflects Linnaean terminology (race, class, nation etc.). The Linnaean system was static. The idea of a new Coloured race or nation, talked about in the early twentieth century, was consciously linked to Darwinian ideas of evolution.

In creating "Coloured" as a race category British administrators were trying to cope with the problem of a substantial proportion of the population that did not slot into precise racial categories. In 1865 the non-White population was sub-divided into Hottentot and Kafir, with those remaining put into a third column under "Other". These "Others" made up more than 40 per cent of the non-White population of the Colony (42 per cent) and more than a quarter of the total population (27 per cent). In Cape Town itself, they represented 93 per cent of the non-Whites and 43 per cent of the total population.

Population Figures for 1865

	European	Hottentot	Kafir	Other	%	Total
Cape Town	15118	628	274	12437	43	28457
Colony	181592	81598	100536	132655	27	496381

In the Census Reports that followed for the rest of the century, "Other" becomes "Mixed and Other". Here "Other" or "Other Coloured" refers to small racial groups, many of them foreign, that are too small to categorize under a major heading. (Malays are sometimes included among these "Other" groups, sometimes enumerated separately.) "Mixed", which is always much the largest component of "Mixed and Other" (over 90 per cent) describes those who cannot be classified according to any race.

The positioning of the Mixed and Other Coloured population became set in 1875 when it was identified as an intermediate group (or "class"). In the words of the Director of Census, it

includes the great and increasing population which has sprung from the intercourse of the colonists with the indigenous races, and *which fills the interval between the dominant people and the natives*. [my emphasis]

By 1875 the figure for this population had decreased in absolute terms (from 132,655 to 87,184) and in percentage from 27 per cent to 12 per cent. The absolute decline comes from a separate enumeration of the Malays and from a less strict definition of Hottentots (to include more of mixed parentage). The percentage decline comes also from the doubling of the African population within the Cape Colony. (In the third census, taken in 1891, the "Mixed" and "Other Coloured" population shot up to 247,806 with stricter definition of Hottentot in addition to natural increase.)

The Coloured (or non-White) population of the colony was divided into five classes in 1875, with Malay and Fingo added to Hottentot and Kafir (now Kafir and Bechuana). Fingoes were separately enumerated on account of their acceptance of European mission education (or, in the words of the Director of Census, their "exceptional intelligence and progress in civilization"). (Census Report, p iii.) Of more relevance to us here, is the Director's comment on the Malays:

Originally of Asiatic origin this small class has become so leavened with foreign elements as to owe its distinctive existence rather to the bond of a common and uniform faith - Mohammedanism, than to any feeling of race. Designated by themselves as Muslim (Islamsche) the national name "Malay" has, to a large number of colonists among whom they live, lost its proper signification and become synonymous with "Mohammedan". It results therefore that a great number of persons of mixed race and many negro proselytes have been included in this class because they are Mohammedans, and also that many have been returned as Malays when not Malays because of the association of their origin with that of the mass of a people with whom they are identical in all but faith.

In the third census, in 1891, the language has, for the most part, moved from class to race. The Director of Census talks of "the six main races" (one European and five Coloured) and in his introductory report he attempted to give a detailed explanation of those enumerated in the final column. There were the Cape-born Coloured persons of mixed race and the foreign born Coloured races such as Indian, Chinese, Mozambique etc. "Other African Foreign persons" are also included.

By 1904 the complexity had reached unmanageable proportions and the Director of Census, Noel Janisch, was left pleading for some rationalization to reduce the paper work. He points out that the races defined are no longer scientific and suggested a reduction from six to "three Fundamental Race Groups", based on colour: white, black and yellow.

Of the Mixed and Other Coloured population, 94 per cent were Mixed, but still the remaining "Other Coloureds" were sub-divided. In his report the Director of Census identified them as Mozambique, Indian, Chinese, Griqua and Others. The Others were then further broken down into 25 groups, if "group" is the word, for they include a solitary Ashanti, Chilean, Liberian and South American in a list that ran from 28 Abyssinians to 24 Zanzibaris. Elsewhere in the same Report, Other Coloureds were sub-divided into Africans, Americans and Asians, and then sub-divided again from these three.

In requesting simplification, Janisch writes of the Hottentots that "pure bred representatives of the Race are probably to be found nowhere in the colony at the present day" (p xxxv), and of the Malays:

I am aware that a strong sentimental plea might be put forward in favour of a separate class for the Malays, but on no valid ground can a section of the population which is so loosely defined, so small numerically and so local in its distribution, be held to merit separate statistical treatment in preference to the many more numerous subdivisions that might be named. (p xxi)

In the first census of the Union of South Africa, in 1911, Janisch's advice had been heeded. The three race categories were named as European, Bantu and Mixed and Other Coloured. During data collection, however, a note was made of 11 sub-categories, although of three of them - Malay, Griqua and Mozambique - it was said that they "should logically be classed as of Mixed race" (p xxii).

The old terminology, "Mixed and Other" was retained, right up to the 1950 census, and as a race category it continued to be relegated to the final column in the tabulations, even when from 1921 onwards a fourth category of "Asiatic" was added. This, being more acceptable as a distinct race, is placed third, although it was the smallest of the four races.

Common Usage

While "Mixed" and "Other Coloured" continued to be used in the Census Reports, by the early nineteenth century, "Coloured" (or "coloured") had become accepted in common parlance, to refer to a population group distinct from African and White. Still, however, it was tentatively used.

Correspondence from churchmen in the Anglican church to SPG in London employed the now accepted streamlined categories: European, native, and Coloured (or coloured). These are different days from fifty years earlier when Lady Duff Gordon wrote of the ethnic complexity, of that "motley crew" of Capetonians. The Malays, however, were still separated off as a small additional group, perceived as the remnants of a race, most of whom were "Mohammedan". The Reverend (later Bishop) T. W. Lavis wrote in 1917:

The Mission has been fortunate in securing a house in the suburbs of Cape Town in the neighbourhood of a district known as "Cape Flats", where "coloured people" (i.e. mixed Africans and Europeans) and Mohammedans abound, and freely and disastrously intermingle.

He goes on to talk about the "regular and systematic visiting in the Malay quarters (Mohammedans of the Cape are practically all of them Malay in origin)".

A bolder approach comes from the writing of Sarah Gertrude Millin in the 1920s. Millin describes Coloureds as a newly emerging race or "nation". In *The South Africans* she refers to three stages in this development, all to be found in the old Cape Colony. The most distant from social integration were those in the border areas (like the Vaal River area where she had been brought up): these people, often the offspring of White fathers and non-White mothers, she described as lacking any cultural context. The second group were the Griquas, Brikwas and others who had established firm identities in isolated localities of the colony but now seemed unable to sustain their group identity against outside pressures on them. And third came the people of Cape Town who, she observed, were forming the nucleus of a new nation into which, presumably, the others would eventually become integrated. These people, she notes, called themselves "the Cape people". She uses White terminology to demote them and calls them Coloured.

From *God's Step-Children*, we can gain some idea of how these people were coming together as a group. No doubt a group consciousness was arising from social proximity, but this social proximity itself came from external pressure. Millin's novel shows how English liberals had much to do with creating a Coloured group through their own social attitudes, with example after example of White patronage, always given at a cost. The Whites in this novel bring education, work and housing to people they distinguish as not White and not Hottentot, making what they give appropriate to their particular station in life, thus creating boundaries and separating them off. (By the end of the book she has also shown how at least two of these White characters, in needing Coloured people dependent on them, end their lives unfulfilled, lonely and pathetic, themselves dependent on the dependence of others.)³

The idea of a new Coloured race, suggested by Millin in the 1920s and by historian W. M. Macmillan in the 1930s, lost favour by the middle of the century. As the Nationalists imposed a tighter legal framework upon the racial categories they inherited, so liberal academics took to arguing that the Coloureds were not a proper race and were unjustly defined as such.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw collaboration between the colonial administration and English settlers in creating a Coloured population separate from White and African. The first established a formal category honed into shape with such precision of enumeration that by the end of the century it was able to delineate people down to the last individual. The second created social awareness of division between White and Coloured and of gradations of colour from "proper Whites" through degrees of Colouredness. None of this was recognized by Whites themselves. The strength of race division and colour gradation lay in seeing it as "natural" (see Catherine Taylor, end note 2).

Coloured and Malay Contrasted: Some Conclusions

Coloured and Malay were both constructs of the nineteenth century that came to look like racial groups. But while Malay identity was promoted by people from within the construct, Coloured identity was created by outsiders - Whites with power - and imposed upon a population group. There is another, closely related, difference between them that has greatly affected the acceptability of "Malay" and "Coloured" as labels (as distinct from ethnic consciousness). This is a difference in the period in which each label was adopted.

The term "Malay" was generally accepted by the early nineteenth century. The British perceived it as a race label referring to a group among the slaves that by this time increasingly applied to Muslims. Several British writers registered a consternation with the term "Malay" applied to converts of different types. "Malay" had been used in the eighteenth century but it had then denoted one of several, if not many, groups among the slaves. By the turn of the century it had come to denote the most distinctive group, built up on Islam. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Malays stood out (according to Duff Gordon, along with the English) head and shoulders above all other groups in Cape Town.

The strength of Malay as a "race" label came from the work of Malays themselves in creating a community bonded by their religion and in cutting themselves off from outsiders except in their openness to converts. As a result, Malays did much to convince British colonialists that they should be treated separately. And indeed the British saw them as the remnants of

a racial group. The term "Malay" may have been popularized originally by Whites in the late eighteenth century because they needed a label by which to name this conspicuous group but the Malays themselves rubber stamped it and used that ethnicity for their own purposes.

"Coloured", in its twentieth century form, came much later. It became fixed only by the early twentieth century and even then remained tentative for the British who played the major part in its construction. During the first half of the nineteenth century "Coloured" referred to anyone who was not White. Light-skinned non-Whites may have been referred to as "people of colour" (equivalent to the twentieth century "slightly coloured"); amongst the slaves they were "Afrikanders". Cape Town had a multiplicity of ethnicities, still noted in the 1860s by Duff Gordon and J. S. Mason.

British administrators would not have been happy about this disorderliness (any more than Captain Percival had been), with most of the ethnic groups in any case vaguely defined and often denoting people only partially what they claimed to be, whether Turks or Mozambiquans. In 1865 the census lumped many of them together as "Other", from 1875 onwards as "Mixed and Other". Only by the turn of the century does a Coloured people emerge as a distinct group. This group was not actively built up from within in the way that the Malay community was. And while Coloured identity was accepted as a *fait accompli* by some, and made use of for political purposes, it remained open to question, and open to dispute later on by the NEUM. And the British who saw Coloureds as an emerging race or nation in the early part of the century had by the middle of the century backed away from this to talk about Coloureds as marginal to Whites.

Among those classified as Coloured there have been different responses to being labelled. Some were content to call themselves Coloured, whether as a political statement (as Alex la Guma did within SACPO) or with resignation as a status group (a position Peter Abrahams describes his family taking). The founders of the APO presumably wanted to be thought of as African. Others called themselves "non-White", "South Africans" or "just people".

The very existence of any marked resistance to ethnicity is in itself significant, and it is here, I think, that we see the greatest creativity from within this designated group. This creativity in rejecting a race or ethnic label is comparable to that of the Malays in their endorsement of a label. To resist ethnicity takes a great deal of energy against the pressure to comply with what is said to exist.

Studies of ethnicity in anthropology, numerous as they are, deal with groups with labels. Anthropologists may look at different ways in which a group may be perceived, changes in the character of that group, differences between the core and fringe areas, disputes over its boundaries, the waxing and waning of its strength of group consciousness or political effectiveness, but to consider the case for people rejecting ethnicity is something we are not at all well equipped to do. Rejecting ethnicity requires a special effort to sustain, and I cannot think that its expression in District Six came from nowhere, without an historical tradition. The questioning of Colouredness represented a form of quiet resistance among people powerless to act more openly. It gave them a secret language and understanding which, ironically enough, contributed to a bonding and group consciousness while at the same time defying any attempt formally to lay this down in absolute terms.

The "Malayness" of the Muslims in District Six provided an alternative identity to Coloured and an identity that gave them protection within a close-knit community that was discriminated against by religion as well as by colour. Whether or not there was some racial or cultural basis to the Malays in the eighteenth century Cape, is less important than the work they themselves put into building themselves up in the nineteenth century by promoting, embellishing, and possibly inventing, Malay traditions.

By the 1970s Malay identity was losing its efficacy as the community became less ghettoized. The provision of more secondary and higher education in the 1960s, and the increased availability of professional and white collar jobs, produced a new generation with different expectations from their predecessors. This, together with investment in religious education from Muslim countries, made educated Muslims in Cape Town impatient with old Malay traditions and indeed to despise them for the ignorance and poverty they represented in their past. Muslims in Cape Town were moving towards a different expression of their

religion that would bring them closer to the main centres of the Islamic world and free them from the parochialism of past generations.

Du Plessis's coffee-table book and the SABC programme on *The Cape Malays* were both designed as public relations exercises to help Whites to a closer and more sympathetic understanding of Malays to Whites. Both were strongly condemned by educated Muslims. They were condemned for presenting a rosy picture of the lives of Malay Muslims and thus for separating them off from the majority of the oppressed in South Africa, for presenting Muslims as a cultural rather than primarily as a religious group, and for setting them in the past. Underlying all this was the determination of Muslims not to allow others to define them.

"Malay", as an ethnic label, was vehemently rejected by educated Muslims in the 1970s and remains low key. But ethnic consciousness remains, though diluted these days by the increasing interaction with Indian Muslims in Cape Town. The old nomenclature, however, could always come back into open acceptability, when the time is right.

NOTES

- 1 Moslem was the term used by traditional-minded Malays. By the 1970s educated Muslims (*sic*) made a point of saying *Muslim* (as the more accurate transliteration from the Arabic) and not Moslem. In this section I use whichever of the two terms seems the more appropriate. Thereafter I stick to Muslim.
- 2 The unrecognized power of English-speaking Whites to impose what they considered "natural" is nicely illustrated by Catherine Taylor in her autobiography published in 1976:

The people of Cape Town had accepted quite naturally the presence of Coloured people at symphony concerts in the City Hall for years. Our public houses were not segregated, Coloured men served as traffic cops, municipal firemen and ambulance drivers. They sat with us on the Cape School Board and represented both Coloured and mixed wards on the Cape Town City Council. (p 106) [The emphasis is mine.]

The easy-going people of the Cape had coped well enough with the mixture of races leaving it to society to make the necessary adjustments and to avoid regimentation and legal rigidity between Coloured and White. The racist philosophy on which apartheid is based is essentially a Transvaal product. In the good old days if a man was not a 'Native' he was White. The subtle gradations of race and skin-colour that have been familiar to the people of the Cape for 300 years were no problem in the Transvaal. (p 117)

- 3 Both these books were influential up to the 1950s. Now they are dismissed: *God's Step-children* is an embarrassment for its title alone. But they are worth reading for the attitudes and behaviour of English liberals of that time. (Indeed, I think *God's Step-children* has been misread. The title comes from a statement, used ironically, by a Hottentot character in the novel. An inept White Christian missionary is trying to bring his religion to a remote community on the Cape frontier. Christianity is seen by his Hottentot congregation as a religion for Whites, and he cannot convince them otherwise. He is being ridiculed by the Hottentots when a woman tries to help him out by suggesting that in his terms they could be described as "God's step-children".)

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