

## **The Natives are Restless**

“Just below the epidermis of our conciliatory politics lies a growing level of racialised anger, resentment, alienation and fear among many South Africans”

Jonathan D. Jansen

When the President’s spokesperson, Titus Mafolo, recently issued invitations to a select group of black South Africans to join a conference of what was called the Native Club, most people I know, white and black, thought this was a joke. Except it was not. Described as “the Presidential Project”, this bringing together of native intellectuals was ostensibly organized to address concerns about, inter alia, the cultural, academic and social marginalization of the black intelligentsia after apartheid. The excavation of the once-hated word “native” from our colonial lexicon might have had playful and humorous intent, but it would inevitably court controversy in the broader public arena.

I was invited by editors of a Sunday newspaper to comment on the Native Club. I described this development as morally offensive and politically divisive, drawing parallels with the Afrikaner Broederbond as nationalist initiatives connected to state power. Never before had I received so many emails and SMS text messages from so many people, across the country, about a newspaper column. Why?

It is clear to me that whatever the intentions of the president’s men, the call into being of the Native Club had a profound effect on ordinary South Africans. There are still many raw, open wounds from our racially divided past and what the Native Club did was to begin scratching where the first layers of healing skin were just beginning to stretch over those painful sores. It is not so much what the Native Club tried to do about the present that concerned people, it was what it suggested about the future that rattled the nerves.

To those who follow the proud history of the President’s party, the African National Congress, the idea of a Native Club was even more perplexing. When the ANC was formed in 1912, it was with the specific intention of breaking the dangerous divisions of tribe and ethnicity as the basis for social organization and political opposition. Most people I know joined the ANC precisely because of its non-sectarian philosophy, its chartered vision that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white”, its modeled politics in which every post-apartheid Cabinet so far consisted of men and (increasingly) women drawn from every religious, cultural, racial and ethnic slice of our society. The Native Club seemed to contradict these trends, and thinkers rightly asked the important question: why now?

It is clear to me that the proposal for a Native Club would have been intolerable under the Mandela Presidency, in part because of the need at the time for a

reconciliatory politics that settled angry citizens and anxious markets; but in part also because of the generosity and humanity of Nelson Mandela. Yet it has been clear for some time that President Mbeki has a very different approach to matters of race than his predecessor. His speeches reveal a thin skin on race matters; his strange (and dangerous) views on AIDS are often explained as a reaction to the fact that he understands the disease to portray Africans as sexual predators and promiscuous people; his two-nations thesis about the economy continues to be interpreted as an unresolved racial bitterness; and his treatment of pretenders to the presidential throne is seen, at best, as disregard for those who bear different racial and ethnic tags. Some of these views, in my opinion, are a bit over the top; but that Mbeki has a strongly racialised opinion of non-Africans is difficult to refute, and it is from these quarters that the idea of a Native Club gained ground.

By labeling themselves as “native intellectuals” the other side could then only be described as “settler intellectuals”—and this is precisely where the hurt, shame and insult began to be felt by ordinary South Africans. *Letters to the Editor* in all the major newspapers bristled with a mixture of anger and fear; white newspaper columnists let loose with unreserved sarcasm on the subject; and “non-natives” decried the lack of inclusion already felt among many non-Africans (in the narrowest, apartheid sense of the word *African*) in economy and society. These readers and writers begin to connect the dots between this sudden, outdated and insulting concept of “settlers” with the terrible experiences of white (and some black) farm owners in Zimbabwe who would literally overnight be discarded as non-citizens by the Mugabe government, a situation not helped by the horrendous history of colonial racism and dispossession in the then Rhodesia.

But South Africa was supposed to be different. This was after all “the rainbow nation” of Desmond Tutu, the “never, never and never again” nation of Nelson Mandela, the all-embracing “I am an African” nation of Thabo Mbeki. Are we destined to follow the path of so many other African nations after independence where early euphoria and nation building was gradually replaced with inter-racial, ethnic and religious strife from the Sudan to Nigeria to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zimbabwe to Eritrea to Mozambique and Angola?

I continue to dismiss such facile assertions as the kind of racism that ascribes predictable behaviour to black people simply because of their race. Yet we should not fool each other that just below the epidermis of our conciliatory politics lies a growing level of racialised anger, resentment, alienation and fear among many South Africans. Anyone with doubts about this should read the entries on the so-called *Friends of Jacob Zuma* website to see the animosity raised by Zulu against Xhosa; or tune-in to the Cape Town’s call-in radio stations after a more qualified Coloured man was allegedly overlooked in favour of an African man for a job at Eskom; or listen to Radio Pretoria’s mode of reporting in heightened (and often exaggerated) emotional tones about the almost daily murders of farming families in the rural heartland at the hands of black men.

It is important to state however that there is nothing inherent in our ascribed identities—religious, racial, ethnic or linguistic—that predisposes human beings towards conflict. Throughout the world, diverse people and communities co-exist, and find ways in which to learn, and live and love together. But it takes very little, especially in post-conflict societies, to inflame old hatreds and prejudices through sometimes deliberate and sometimes innocent acts. In this context, the Native Club incites rather than reconciles, and divides rather than unites.

My views on the Native Club are shaped by where I am, what I see and what I hear daily among my students. I happen to work in a former white, Afrikaner institution which has growing numbers of black and non-Afrikaans speaking students and faculty. I witness daily the difficulties of racial and cultural border crossings among campus dwellers, and how easily students (and staff) can be provoked into confrontation. I notice that while the university is racially desegregated, it is not socially integrated. I notice how my black students struggle to create common ground with white students, and how white students struggle to respond as they carry the powerful memories of their parents.

For example, I asked my history and language lecturers to expose students, black and white, to both the Voortekker Monument and the Apartheid Museum on one day, and to then allow the students to say what they saw, heard and felt during these excursions. On returning from one of these recent day trips, a white student asked in class: “okay, so we saw the apartheid museum; so when will be built a museum for all the white people killed on farms?” This is a profoundly troubling question, and one that cannot be dismissed as a case of reactive racism. What such a question of course confirms is the deeply unsettled environment within which South Africans live.

I sometimes get angry that we had an elite reconciliation, one in which our racially divided political masters resolved differences, went fishing together and negotiated freedom, without a similar process available to ordinary South Africans. There is no manual in CNA or Exclusive Books on racial reconciliation and social justice for citizens as they live and work alongside each other in the heat of the day.

What South Africa desperately needs are initiatives that bring people together in open and honest dialogue about our oppressive past, and about our common future. I sense that we desperately need to talk about the past, not for the sake of blaming but for the cause of healing. We need projects that tell of the humiliation of the pass laws for black people and the concentration camps for Afrikaners. And we need stories of solidarity, of how our freedom was attained through the common struggles of persons like Beyers Naude, Yusuf Dadoo, Dulcie September, John Harris and Oscar Mphetla.

The members of the Native Club fail to understand that just as the social and political afflictions of apartheid could only be overcome through solidarity across the coincidence of colour, culture and creed, so too will the developmental challenges of the post-apartheid period only be surmounted through the common purpose, energy and commitment of all South Africans.

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