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The Afrikaners: Who are they? What is their future?

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I have been asked to speak on the very comprehensive topic of who “the Afrikaners” are and what “their” future is. I realise that it is somewhat impertinent of me to have an attempt at these topics at all.

In the first place, after Hermann Giliomee’s massive and monumental work, “The Afrikaners”, most subsequent comments on the subject become rather trite.

Secondly, the conversation over “the Afrikaner”, “their” identity and place in society, “their” fate and future, has the form of an interiorised monologue. The group, or assumed group, mostly murmurs to itself in either anxious or exalted tone about essence, destiny and fate. The outsider intrudes onto this terrain, into this discursive space. I have no qualifications to play that intrusive role.

There is, furthermore, a tendency to patronise “the Afrikaners” in these sorts of discussions. The approach is as towards an exotic species, befitting special consideration, even special methods of understanding, special epistemology. It is as if the ghost of “volkekunde” – that old Afrikaans discipline of studying the natives - has come back to now visit itself upon its erstwhile practitioners.

Be all that as it may; I had agreed with Eddie Webster that I would join the discussion and I do so with all the afore-going reservations and footnotes.

All my references to “the Afrikaner” and the possessive pronoun “their” had been placed in inverted commas, because I am not convinced that one can speak about a social group in such unproblematized terms as is often done by many “Afrikaner” insiders as well as outsiders. I have a sense that many South Africans who are assumed to be part of that group have little interest in being so identified and in the identity concerns underlying those discourses and definitions. Hence, also, the tentativeness of the inverted commas.

(Incidentally, I have much sympathy with those unwillingly categorised because I had literally grown up in inverted commas with the ascribed categorisation of “coloured”.)

An interesting question to me is: in these social identity discussions, with which other categories does “the Afrikaner” rank in the taxonomy of identities? An understanding of that taxonomy and the relationship amongst categories may help us to advance beyond merely concerns with “the Afrikaners” towards a conception of identity formation in South Africa at large.

Do “Afrikaners”, and more specifically the theoreticians and articulators of “Afrikanerskap” and “Afrikaner identity”, conceive of other identities on similar scale and nature as “Afrikaner”? And what would those be? Other linguistically defined categories such as Xhosas, Zulus, and so forth?

The Afrikaans language has of course historically played a central role in the formation and conception of an “Afrikaner identity” and appears to continue doing so for those that have these concerns. There are different interpretations of this history of the linking of language and Afrikaner nationalism, some portraying the picture of pure love of language leading to a nationalist movement, another point of view interpreting it as a political movement usurping the language that was widely and even primarily spoken by others outside of the political movement for narrow nationalistic purposes. Whatever the truth, the Afrikaans language became a powerful rallying point for the Afrikaner nationalist movement.

The presence in South Africa of so many black – and particularly “Coloured” – speakers of Afrikaans has always complicated the language based claims to identity for Afrikaners. In the new and current societal and political circumstances that becomes even more the case.

There is little evidence that black speakers of the language have any great wish to be “Afrikaners”, or more accurately to be known as “Afrikaners”. (I make this correction and distinction between “to be” and “to be known”, because once more I am uncertain of such identities as categories that one IS rather than constructed categories of definition, of being known as.)

There is also still evidence that some articulators of the notion of “Afrikaner identity” do not include black speakers of the language in their conception of “Afrikaners”. This then leads to a racial definition creeping in – Afrikaners being White Afrikaans speaking people. And that obviously complicates matters in a society striving towards non-racialism. It complicates matters not only, or not even primarily, for the non-racial society in making, but particularly for the group defining itself along those lines. It opens itself up to stigmatisation as being racist or

at best racially based, and that perception has potential consequences for the future of such a group in a society with non-racial designs.

And to digress for a moment: that perception could have, in fact I suspect is already having, consequences for the future of the Afrikaans language which in the minds of so many non-Afrikaans-speakers is inextricably linked to “Afrikaner”. Afrikaans is unfortunately too often associated with reactionary and racially based positions and stances due to that linkage. This in turn reflects in the manner even legitimate claims of Afrikaans are being dealt with or responded to.

There are those of us who are not white, have no linkage to or concern with Afrikaner identity and are Afrikaansspeaking and with a concern for the future of the Afrikaans language within a non-racial and multilingual context. In fact, we are at present in the process of convening a meeting with the old Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns about the fundamental transformation of that body into one that would be totally non-racial, inclusive and with explicitly progressive stance and approach. It would, we hope, be a body that would concern itself with the continued growth and development of Afrikaans as a language of the so-called higher forms of expression, but do so as a dynamic component of a non-racial and multilingual society.

I said I would digress for a moment, but perhaps this is not such a digression after all. It may well be that the future, or part of the future (for futures are complex and not of single dimensions), of many of those who find themselves with the identity label of “Afrikaner” could be influenced by such non-racial projects of Afrikaans-speakers aimed at integrating the language and its activities into the mainstream of a society celebrating its diversity.

The Afrikaans language has achieved remarkably in many spheres. Its development was obviously closely linked to the political and social position of a part of its body of speakers. Then again the development of any language is linked to the politics of those promoting it. Afrikaans developed in less than a century a refined corpus of literature and literary criticism. It is a developed language of science, philosophy, scholarship and general education. As a spoken language in its various regional variants it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the country.

The end of minority rule and the transition to democracy had to affect the position of the language. It is, in the first place, no longer one of two favoured official languages and no longer enjoys the power patronage of the apartheid years. And there can be no arguing about the language as a consequence of those changes having “lost ground” – to use that loaded phrase – with regards to its so-called higher functions.

In public life it is no longer as significant as it was. As a language of academia it is steadily eroding. The Afrikaans-language schooling that fed the language growth is diminishing. These are the developments, one suspects, that are amongst other things feeding the sense of embattlement in the midst of those worrying and articulating about “the Afrikaners” and “their” future.

Those concerns are not baseless or illegitimate. In fact, if we can for the moment forget the sometimes narrow chauvinistic and even plain racialistic overtones and accompaniments of some parts of the Afrikaans discourse, I would contend that a genuine concern for the continued and sustained development of Afrikaans represents a progressive moment in the development of our so-called new South Africa.

Our Constitution represents the base text, the canon, of what we desire to be, to look like, as a society, as a collective of human beings living together. The celebration of social diversity is one of our foundational values contained and propagated in that national document of dreaming ourselves. Linguistic diversity – multilingualism – is a key component of that diversity promotion and celebration.

A progressive, or non-retrogressive, insistence on the creation of space for the Afrikaans language to continue its growth and development, to contain its erosion, is a powerful tool for the promotion of linguistic diversity. I was once asked by the former Minister of Education to advise on the future role and place of Afrikaans in the higher education system. We recommended that each of the official languages other than English be assigned a university or number of universities to take responsibility for its development. In the case of Afrikaans this would translate to sustained development.

Point is: it is not illegitimate for Afrikaansspeakers to insist on language rights; on the contrary, it could be a powerful contributor to the realisation of one of our foundational notions about ourselves. That insistence should, however, then be within a progressive understanding of multi-lingualism and the rights of all.

This might appear to have led us away from the primary topics of who “the Afrikaners” are and what “their” future is. I suspect though that for white Afrikaansspeaking youth the interest in exclusive and excluding traditional concepts of “Afrikaners” is fast waning. With many of them, and one can safely predict that it will be more so for future generations, the primary interest would be in the future well-being of the language rather than in other ethnic or racial trappings of perceived identity. And I must even confess to a sense that the interest in the future of the language itself may also be waning.

Let me conclude by saying that in many fields and spheres it continues to go remarkably well with Afrikaans post-1994. Afrikaans newspapers and magazines are doing very well. There is veritable renaissance in Afrikaans music. Afrikaans literature continue to grow. Even Penguin is publishing an Afrikaans novel soon. There is this blossoming of Afrikaans-based arts festivals all over the country.

On the other hand, there are those signs of erosion in the public sphere that I referred to.

Afrikaans, used here as a signifier for the various aspects of the community life of its variety of speakers, has a history of not dealing well with its own diversity, leave alone fitting into and living with broader diversity.

Its challenge is to confront its destructive internal dividedness, overcoming racial and ethnic exclusiveness within own ranks even though respecting and celebrating its own rich diversity. And to position itself dynamically as part of the diversity wealth of South Africa.

It is within that framework, I think, that “Afrikaners” may find a sustainable future.