



## The UKZN Griot. Of Names and Identities

BY:

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Taking my students on extended field trips, especially to the nether regions of Southern Africa, is always a heart-warming experience. They are exposed to new worlds, new languages, new encounters. They are often astonished at the strangers they become in other places. 'Are you from Arabia?' is the standard question our South African female Indian students are asked when they visit the Northern Cape. (The Indian males eschew the adventure.) Conversely, '*Eish, jy is mos een van ons*' is the first observation offered our so-called Coloured students passing through the province. Black students sometimes feel out of place as the North Cape locals speak Afrikaans in a province that remains largely "Coloured", a category in which they are discursively imprisoned by officialdom.

At our Botswana and Namibian research sites, Afrikaans is also the language the indigenous speak with visitors, and our Tswana/Sotho-speaking students engage interpreters when talking to some Botswanan Tswana speakers. The respective Tswana speakers need interpreters to interpret their interpreters. In Limpopo, a Lecturer from Western Cape with a very strong Cape Flats accent is identified as "English" by her Venda students. My own surname has been sometimes assumed by the odd White to be Zulu, resulting occasionally in racist and/or exclusionary responses. Alternatively, I am thought to be a pot bellied wise old Black man (see [Brian Semujju in UKZNdaba Issue 32](#)). My Transvaal accent, however, initially confounded my colleagues in Natal who then spoke the King's English.

How can Ian Player, Johnny Clegg and Nick Steel become "White" Zulus? Why are Tswana speakers who speak Zulu with an accent othered as not African by the Durban Zulu-speaking rank and file? Afrikaans is under pressure but is considered an indigenous language by the first indigenous of South Africa. The first known script in Afrikaans is written in Arabic, emanating from the Malay slaves brought to the Western Cape. Is speaking Zulu without an accent the key to ethnic adoption? How does one then tick the form asking about "race" (for statistical purposes?).

We are each othered by the passing parade and officialdom. Our identities are fixed by stereotypes, legitimized in official forms, and willfully mistaken by ideologues. On one of our trips via Uppington a very short, young Indian South African, a petite student wearing khaki pants, shirt and cap was standing on a street corner waiting for the team to exit a shop. To her astonishment, drivers of parked cars started handing her money. She came to me, showed me the money, and asked me what was happening. Connecting the semiotic dots, we concluded that she had been mistaken for a "car guard". Car guards are not organised in this town, have no identifying vests, and most of these self-appointed opportunists are often drunk. Her good behaviour of hanging about had drawn reward, even though she was not guarding anything. Tongue-in-cheek I suggested that she return to her spot and resume standing about looking official and then donate the proceeds to defraying the excursion's expenses.

A year later Anusha wrote to me from Korea where she was now teaching English. She told me that her short stature was not an issue but her weight was. She was identified as Sri Lankan, because she did not fit the "African" profile, even though her darker skin marked her as "Black" amongst Koreans. My Indian students born and bred in Durban are bewildered when they visit India, they look, dress, walk, and sound different to mainland populations and where in South Africa they are classified as "Indian/Asian", in India they are othered as foreigners, because they don't live in India or talk like them.

When I visit Italy passport officers want to know why don't I speak fluent Italian; people who meet me for the first time – even when I was much younger – are astonished that I am young, don't have long flowing white hair or smoke a pipe. This is the stereotype of professors popularly considered to be wise beyond their years. Amongst the ?Khomani are some who tell me that they are the professors, teaching me the often clueless student.

These vignettes came to mind after an authorship workshop I had conducted at the first International Congress on African Psychology held at the University of Limpopo. A fascinating discussion occurred during lunch, deriving from experiences relayed by the delegate who had immigrated to Limpopo from the University of Western Cape. Why can't we just identify ourselves as South Africans, she asked? She speaks English but does not consider herself English. Neither for that matter do I.

Language does not determine our respective identities. Many of my African colleagues working in the West tell me I am African. Many of them only found out that out that they are considered Black (even if they are Arab) when they got there. Similarly, why do the quantitatives insist on Results and Findings when the qualitatives are looking for other kinds of relational knowledge? Is psychology really Western, or can there be an African psychology? What are the risks of a homogenizing exceptionalism?

Ultimately, the whole notion of identity slides along via stereotypes we all have about others. Discourses tell individuals who they are even when they know that they are not. 'Don't tell me where to stand, I know where I am', was the young academic's very pertinent comment. Magisterial assertion, a priori claims and dogmatism were cautioned by the idea of multipositioning offered by UKZN's Augustine Mwoye's on the nature of African psychology. Multicentricity, rather than Afrocentricism or Eurocentricism was the nuanced complementary

theoretical strategy proposed by another keynote speaker, Canadian-based Ghanian George J Sefa Dei, to avoid the imposition of “being positioned”. Multicentricity, anyone?

- Keyan G Tomaselli is a closet Psychologist masquerading as an honorary indigenous. In the Kalahari he is known as “Die Prof” where he can be often found even though there are no findings to be found.

*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.*