

## **AFRIKANER IDENTITY TODAY: A RESPONSE TO GILIOME**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I shall confine myself to Giliomee's proposal to establish a "non-political organisation" for the promotion of the Afrikaans language and culture, akin to the Jewish Board of Deputies.

As a sociologist of language, I know that it is to be expected that in a period of democratic transition socially significant markers of difference such as language, religion and other cultural, as well as 'racial', features can and will be used as instruments to mobilise people in order to retain or to obtain power, i.e., control of existing or potential resources. It is in fact one of the main strategic objectives of a nation-building project — whether the government of the day is aware of this or not — to limit or to neutralise completely such tendencies by means of economic and other social programmes that will generate countervailing tendencies in the society.

It is especially perceived or actual minority groups that are exposed to the temptation to mobilise in this manner. In South Africa, it is ironical that all social groups are vulnerable, not because we are a 'nation of minorities' in P. W. Botha's sense, but because the black majority has historically been oppressed and exploited as a social minority. That is the reason for the policy of affirmative action — given the framework of the Kempton-Park settlement — whatever one's attitude to it might be. That is also the source of the danger of a devastating Africanism inherent in that policy if it is based on 'race' and not on class; it is, after all, the poor — not black people — who have to be affirmed. The fact that the large majority of the poor in South Africa happen to be black people is the result of our colonial and apartheid history.

### **PROMOTION OF MULTILINGUISM**

I can support any movement which promotes multilingualism in South Africa. I cannot support a movement which has as its objec-

tive the promotion and protection of the interests of any one language community, including English, exclusively. This is the reason why I serve on the Pan South African Language Board. It is also the reason why I am totally opposed to General Viljoen's Commission, which is conceived of within a framework of monolingual albeit cooperating linguistic, religious and cultural 'communities'.

Afrikaans-speaking people who are concerned about the reduction in status and the future of Afrikaans should realise that they will only be able to protect their language rights if they do so within an overarching framework of multilingualism. They should at the outset form alliances with all those who are opposed to the hegemonic pretensions and homogenising but none the less discriminatory effects of English as the *de facto* sole official language of South Africa. In my opinion, they should do this within organisations which are not tied to this or that particular language group. The danger of sectarian politicisation of language-based organisations and, therefore, of language-based conflict, is simply too big in the present situation. Racial conflict can very easily resurface in the guise of language conflict.

It is axiomatic that writers' circles, theatre associations, film- and music associations and similar cultural organisations that concern themselves with the promotion of the treasures and the aesthetic potential of any specific South African language should and will be supported.

### **INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND GROUP RIGHTS**

A word about the tired debate as regards individual rights and group rights. Either of these in the abstract is simply suspect. Those exponents of individual rights who fail to make it clear that the inherited inequalities based on colonial conquest and exploitation have to be addressed before one can speak meaningfully of equal (individual) rights are simply prettifying the ugly reality of poverty and inequality in South Africa today. On the other hand, in our particular historical situation, recourse to the pre-industrial notion of group rights implies acceptance of a consociational brand of democracy which, under unfavourable circumstances, will lead us directly to Lebanon, Bosnia or even Ruanda and Burundi.

We have to devise a policy and a practice which will at one and the same time promote that which is common to all South Africans and cherish and respect the variability of our society. In other words,

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we have to build a Gariep nation where the tributaries with their sources in Africa, Europe, Asia and to some extent also in America flow together to constitute the mainstream without any of them ever being washed away by the hegemonic overflowing of any of them.

### **CULTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES**

My advice to those who are concerned about the future of Afrikaans, or of any other South African language for that matter, is that they should not establish a specifically Afrikaans movement. They should attempt rather to bring together all those in South Africa who wish to promote all our languages and to protect the rights of all of them so that we can create a model democratic state in which individual multilingualism can be realised while citizens can at the same time remain Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, etc., whenever they want to be such.

If we cannot promote a culture without boundaries we may well be deepening the trenches of future ethnic wars.