

Toward the Past

ILHA DO DESTERRO

DE LA REY IS NEW ANCESTOR OF AFRIKANER YOUTH

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Deliberate thwarting of expressions of guilt, shame and forgiveness prevents Afrikaners from redefining themselves. This could solidify them into an intransient group, says ...

Nearly five years ago three young and unknown Afrikaner men, Bok van Blerk, Johan Vorster and Sean Else, produced a song about one of the lesser-known generals of the Anglo-Boer War: General Koos de la Rey. The Anglo-Boer War destroyed about a third of the Afrikaner with 26,000 women and children dying in the first concentration camps of the 20th century. De la Rey is portrayed in romantic heroic terms, contrasted with the Boers in their trenches (itself an invention of De la Rey) and the women and children in the concentration camps. Two phenomena characterised the release of this song: it became the first Afrikaans song ever to sell 122,000 copies in less than six months, more than a hundred copies per day, which indicates that it was popular among both right- and left-wing Afrikaners.

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And it became the object of what can only be described as obsessive attention locally as well as internationally.

It is important to bear in mind that General De la Rey was known for:

1. Being the last Boer general to enter the war, because he believed a peaceful solution could be found;
2. Being against the exclusionist policy of Paul Kruger; and
3. The good treatment he gave to the wounded British Lord Methuen and other prisoners of war.

The most popular and accepted interpretation of the song was the suggestion that the Afrikaners were rising up. They were fighting the Anglo-Boer War all over again - only this time the anti-British sentiment in the song served as a mask for anti-black, anti-government, anti-new-South Africa feelings. In essence, it was suggested, the song was right-wing, capitalising on underground racism and white frustrations about loss of power. The Boers were staging a comeback.

In the song itself, however, there are no signs of frustration, white-on-black racism or of being aggrieved. The song writers themselves had persistently resisted being hijacked by right-wing sentiments. The essence of the song is indeed ethnic (and so it should be, because it is as an ethnic group that Afrikaners stands accused), but by deliberately starting with the most honourable moment in Afrikaner history, the CD as a whole attempts to change the Afrikaner trajectory of “laager” into a new one that ends with multiracial icons like Brian Habana and Bob Marley.

The CD captures the binary opposition of an apartheid past and an insecure, but preferred present. The lyrics ask: how can they, the youth, live as fellow citizens without betraying those whom they love, but who have upheld apartheid?

To break the either/or position, the De la Rey figure is used as a mediator towards a possible third option, guiding the content of the CD from trenches of shame and fear to a liveable and honourable present.

In another song on the CD, devoted to the Afrikaans language, the lyrics say: we are building the language anew so that we can go with pride to where Afrikaners are. A third song links pride to the writer's grandfather: "He doesn't need to say it, because it is in his eyes: a pride that makes me ashamed, a pride from above."

Note that this time pride is directly linked to embarrassment or shame.

These contradictory feelings of love, and rejection of what the loved one did, cause havoc in the formation of a young identity.

Gertrud Hardtmann found in her study on the children of Nazis that the "mutual defences—denial, splitting and projection—tied the members of the family together like a sect."

Studies directed at groups of Dutch collaborators who after World War II found themselves on the "wrong" side of the war, indicated that although they wanted to uphold and celebrate the "right" side after the war, they felt excluded. They were happy that the values of civil order had been restored, but felt "depressed to live in a country ... in which they were afraid to speak about their background, a country in which they have to stay out of conversations about the war ... To be silent about one of the most important and most emotional topics in Dutch memory means not to belong."

"They are orphans inside," says Hans Speier "reliant on surrogate mothers and fathers." I want to suggest that De la Rey is a surrogate father, not leading to an uprising, but assisting children to deal with their guilt in such a way that they can at last begin to integrate into the new society in which they feel they actually belong.

The song writers indeed have sensed the dilemma: I cannot criticise my apartheid-supporting father, because I see how insecure he has become in a country that he no longer understands or feels welcome in. I cannot criticise the new government because I have come to understand the devastation that racial discrimination did to the psyche—if the new government is greedy, paranoid, defensive, racist, angry, prone to stupid remarks and so on. In other words: I suffer from double guilt. When I utter the words “corruption” and “discrimination”, I feel how they die in my Afrikaner mouth.

So how do I participate in the making of my country? What are the words that will legitimise my contribution as useful, worthy and equal? How will all the goodwill I have towards the land ever be heard and accepted?

It is therefore ironic that the interpretation of the dominant media, hammered home the idea that the song calls for an uprising of revenge. One got the distinct idea that journalists and some academics were actually missing the good old bad days of the struggle where the Afrikaners made it easy for everybody to determine who was evil and who were the saviours!

White English-speaking South Africans, more and more under fire from a black government who has come to badmouth liberals, seems to be in need of “bad racist Afrikaners on the rise”. It is apparently confusing when Afrikaners try to work through their guilt or try to become part of the country: the forgiveness-asking of former police minister Adriaan Vlok and now Free State University rector Jonathan Janssen’s forgiveness of four Afrikaner students, are excellent examples of how the coals are stoked so that nobody dares escape the bondage of shame or victimhood. Don’t we want to see how the four Afrikaner students will respond on campus to the forgiveness? Don’t we want to see how Vlok’s feetwashing

will influence other Afrikaners? Or do we prefer that nobody asks forgiveness, or forgives, that nobody changes or accepts—there is one duty only and that is for bad to STAY recognizably bad.

What are the consequences of this?

I want to suggest that it delegitimises Afrikaner's attempts to participate in the debates about the moral fibre of South Africa. It is not that Afrikaners are shy of criticising—our newspapers, phone-in programmes, open letters and dinner parties overflow with criticism and disdain for the current dispensation. But it is among ourselves. Those who raise their voices are either ignored or become mere martyrs of their own truths.

How does one then influence a government not to do what you have done?

The Afrikaner community lives as an accused minority in daily intimacy with those it mistreated and somehow it more and more feels as if only one option exists: sit it out. Wait for the harmed side to become worse than you ever were, validating your treatment of them.

But I want to rethink possibilities of reconciliation. Ron Kraybill has identified several steps in what he regards as the cycle of reconciliation. In order to provide a functioning democracy people need to reconcile. Kraybill identifies the following steps after groups had been harmed: a turning away from one another, a redefining of oneself within a safe space, a first small act of trust ... and the process repeats itself.

It is essential for Afrikaners to invest everything in redefining themselves in a positive and honourable way. It is even more essential that the attempts of Afrikaners are respected and accepted. Research has found that where people were not allowed to redefine themselves, they solidify into an intransient and destructive entity. If we want

to confront the immense socioeconomic walls of South Africa we cannot afford any undermining group. To try to address poverty while at the same time ignoring Afrikaners in which this country has invested three centuries of privilege seems not only foolhardy, but may just be disastrous.

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