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## The Search for Identity in a Multicultural Society : South Africa

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► **To cite this version:**

Thomson Rod. The Search for Identity in a Multicultural Society : South Africa. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1995, CAPES 96 and Other Essays, 10, pp.119-130. hal-02350308

**HAL Id: hal-02350308**

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350308v1>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

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**The Search for Identity in a Multicultural Society:  
South Africa.**

*International Seminar - December 1994 - La Réunion*  
(Excerpts of the debates)

(after "The Martial Art of Aikido: A Metaphor for a New Multicultural Southern Africa," by Rod Thomson, University of Pretoria)

— **Someone in the audience:** I don't know if in the existential phenomenology, there is a way to change something by accepting it, because it's a whole system that, from the first link to the last link, is completely connected. So it's very difficult to change one thing without touching something else in the whole system of management. So I felt that it was very interesting in the process, but the results I couldn't give a very clear dollar investment and dollar return to the businessmen who are paying for that process.

— **Rod THOMSON:** inaudible answer (.....)

— **Rosemary CROMARTY:** from another perspective, I was just going to say that there are groups doing conflict-resolution in South Africa in the wild life, and particularly in the reserves and the Outwood Bound Mountain organisations where they take managers and people on the ground, at the grass-roots and they work through conflict but this is more the achievement of the individual in himself. He has to work against himself and use his fellow-participants to solve problems.

— **Jean-Pierre CAMBEFORT:** I would say that to me, something very important in the concept of Aikido is that it is done to overcome the duality, to try to overcome the idea of conflict through a physical experience but the matter is to understand to what extent the people who practice Aikido are able to transfer the physical experience to overcome duality to a sort of mental consequence. What I

observe, because I've been practising Aïkido for many years, what I can see, is that you have many who have been practising Aïkido for many years, ten, twenty years, who are good practitioners, good technicians but who have not transferred in their daily life the lesson of Aïkido itself. So this is the stake of Aïkido. It's very interesting from a physical point of view but to me, the question is the ability to transfer this physical experience to the daily life. This is the whole stake of the practice. And this is the big problem in fact. So the question is: if Aïkido spreads over South Africa as a way of conflict-resolution, do you think that the indigenous cultures will be able to apply these spiritual concepts?

— **Rod THOMSON**: I've found that, in fact, the principles of Aïkido, I mean from a Japanese Oriental worldview, or paradigms, are in many ways closer to African worldview than are to a western scientific position. So when I talk about things like accepting our connectedness, for the Xhosa or the Zulu, his life only has a meaning as he contributes to his community and his position in the community is reflected to him. His identity is not "I," "me," separate, his identity is grounded in his place, his role in the community, the "we," the "our," whereas for the management group, or the western group it's much more difficult to overcome that what we call "Cartesian separation."

— **Jean SEVRY** : j'ai plusieurs questions. La première, c'est à propos de l'intervention. Cette façon de travailler sur les pulsions d'agressivité, la question que je pose c'est : est-ce que ce ne serait pas un alibi, j'insiste sur le mot alibi? La deuxième question, mais qui fait partie de la première, ce n'est pas à propos de l'intervention, en terme de psychologie, mais de l'intervenant : est-ce que cela ne créerait pas une sorte de dépendance vis-à-vis de l'intervenant, qui finalement, pour moi, pourrait peut-être être, et ça me semble très dangereux, un leader disons de type charismatique ? Alors, dans le fond, c'est la même question, quelque part : est-ce que, en allant ailleurs, on ne fait pas de l'alibi ? parce que l'alibi, c'est de dire : je n'y suis pas et j'y suis, donc quelque part, on n'y est pas... Ce problème de l'agressivité, dans une société comme l'Afrique du Sud, c'est très lourd et complexe.

*There're several questions I'd like to ask. The first concerns the action of the group leader and the way he attempts to modify aggressive impulses. What I'd like to ask is: isn't this just an alibi — and I really mean alibi?*

*The second question, which is linked to the first, concerns not the action of the*

*group leader in the psychological sense, but the group leader himself. Isn't there a risk that all this will create a sort of dependency on the group leader? As far as I'm concerned, this could, in the end, and this seems to me very dangerous, create a, shall we say, charismatic type of leader? So, ultimately, it boils down to the same question: by changing places, aren't you setting up an alibi, because the alibi consists in saying: I'm not there and I'm there, so, in a way, you're not there. In a society, this problem of aggressivity is extremely difficult and complex.*

*(due to technical problems, the question could not be heard and had to be repeated)*

— **Jean SEVRY** : La question est très simple : à propos de l'intervention d'un psychothérapeute sur un groupe — moi aussi, j'ai fait beaucoup ce genre de travail — la première question que je pose, c'est : à quoi ça sert, à qui ça sert, cette intervention ? Est-ce que quelque part, par rapport au problème de l'agressivité dans une société, ça n'est pas une zone d'alibi ? — ça, c'est la première partie de la question. Deuxième partie — ça me semble pourtant très simple : quel est, alors, le rôle de l'intervenant ? est-ce que, à ce moment-là, il ne crée pas des phénomènes de dépendance en tant que leader d'un groupe ? — ce qui est encore une autre forme d'alibi... Le problème étant : se prendre en charge et prendre en charge son agressivité.

*My question is actually very simple : it concerns the action of a psychotherapist on the group — I've also often done this kind of work — The first question I'm asking is: what is the point of this action and who does it benefit? What I'm asking is whether, as regards the problem of aggressivity in a society, all this is not setting up the structures for an alibi? That's the first part of my question. The second part, and this seems very simple, is: what is, then, the role of the group leader? In what he does, is he not creating dependency phenomena in his role of group leader, which is again another form of alibi? The problem being; being responsible for oneself and being responsible for one's own aggressivity.*

— **Rod THOMSON**: What I was saying earlier, which you might remember, is that in African culture, a soothsayer traditionally during the ritual of "Dambe," which is a day and night concern, is invited to interpret, but not in the sense of imposing, but to allow the meaning of this letting-go, letting-be to emerge from the people in the ritual. Similarly, from a, as I understand it, existential phenome

nological perspective, I, the psychotherapist, am not interpreting what this patient's dreams mean by imposing on him, I am facilitating a healing to come out in our common humanity, looking as opposed to interpreting. I am not in the old Freudian tradition, a therapist who creates dependency, rather I work through the resistance which allows a person to move on, which usually emerges when a vision of the person or the community comes forth.



*(after "Pertinence d'une approche comparative des sociétés sud-africaine et réunionnaise sous l'éclairage des sciences humaines et sociales," by Jean-Pierre Cambefort, Université de la Réunion)*

— **Jean SEVRY** : Je suis très impressionné par le programme que vous venez de décrire, parce que vraiment il me semble très, très riche... Une toute petite première question : j'espère que vous ferez appel à des littéraires, parce qu'on a travaillé beaucoup sur ce problème en particulier de l'image parentale, de l'image du père, et de sa dégradation, par exemple dans les littératures maghrébines. Moi, je pense aussi aux littératures noires de l'Afrique du Sud. Il y a d'autres figures qui se mettent en place, en particulier l'oncle, ou la mère ou la grand-mère. La question que je voudrais poser est : qu'est-ce que vous allez faire dans tout ça du substrat économique ?

*I was very impressed by the project you described, which seems to me very fruitful. Just a first question: I hope you will ask the advice of literature specialists, because a lot of work has been done on these aspects of the problem and in particular on the parental image, the father image, and the way it has been devalued, for example in North African literature. I'm also thinking of the black African literature of South Africa. There are other figures which come to mind, in particular that of the uncle, or the mother or the grand-mother. The question I'd like to ask is: how do you treat the economic foundation of all this?*

— **Jean-Pierre CAMBEFORT** : c'est vrai que, de ma place, je raisonne en psychologue, j'ai orienté mon point de vue sur les questions qui me paraissaient, en tant que psychologue, pertinentes, et j'ai essayé d'inclure des sujets qui, de mon point de vue, permettraient une collaboration multidisciplinaire. Les économistes ont parfaitement leur place, bien entendu, dans un programme de recherche pluridisciplinaire (...)

Ce que vous avez dit sur les images parentales et le fait que la littérature a déjà travaillé dans ces domaines paraît fondamental. La question qui guide ma pensée, c'est la question du bagage culturel et symbolique, sa perte, son érosion, son maintien, ses transformations et les compromis qui sont faits à partir de ce bagage culturel ; ça me paraît tout à fait fondamental. L'identité sociale, bien sûr je suis tout à fait d'accord avec ce qui a été dit antérieurement, se construit dans les interactions ; ça ne se réduit pas à une politique linguistique, ça ne se réduit pas à des facteurs économiques, c'est une superposition, un peu comme un gâteau en pâte feuilletée, des différents facteurs, c'est évident. Mais un des constituants fondamentaux de l'identité me paraît être l'identité individuelle qui se construit dans la psychogénèse. Lorsqu'on est clinicien et quand on est confronté à la psychopathologie, ou au spectacle de la souffrance, on se rend compte que la question identitaire est d'abord à poser en ces termes-là, et que l'identité sociale, le fait de se sentir Zoulou ou Xhosa ou Indien ou Malbar, etc., c'est une problématique qui arrive après. Donc, la question, c'est l'établissement du lien humain intersubjectif en tant que tel dans l'ontogénèse, cela me paraît être les pierres fondatrices de l'identité du sujet en tant que tel ; et là, il peut y avoir des dérapages ; il peut y avoir des dérapages dans la relation mère-enfant, par exemple, si les groupes dans lesquels se produisent ces dérapages ne sont plus munis, en quelque sorte, des outils socio-affectifs pour établir une relation avec l'enfant, par exemple. Il peut y avoir, par exemple, des passages à l'acte, ou une impulsivité caractérielle, ou il peut y avoir une carence affective qui s'établit parce que non seulement la personne a, comme on dit, des problèmes personnels ou psychologiques, mais parce que aussi, elle appartient à un groupe où les fondements du lien inter-humain n'ont plus été véhiculés en tant que valeurs. C'est pour cela que je parle des pertes des repères éthiques et moraux. Donc la question identitaire peut affecter, peut tarauder, peut éroder, peut abîmer directement les constituants mêmes de la personnalité du sujet, avant de s'établir en terme social, c'est-à-dire avant de se poser au nom d'une communauté ou au nom d'une politique de langues ou au nom de facteurs économiques, précisément.

*It's true that I am a psychologist and obviously this will influence my analysis. I have treated the questions which seemed relevant to me as a psychologist and I have tried to include subjects which, to my mind, will make it possible to carry out a multidisciplinary analysis. Of course economists have an important role to play in a multidisciplinary research program (...)*

*What you said concerning the parental image and the fact that this question has already been treated in literature seems fundamental to me. The fundamental question is that the cultural and symbolic foundation, and the loss and erosion of this foundation as well as the way it must be nourished and the changes and compromises which take place within this cultural foundation. All this seems to me fundamental. Of course I entirely agree with what has already been said: the social identity is built through interaction; it can be reduced neither to a linguistic policy, nor economic factors. In fact, it is a complex multi-layered structure consisting of different factors one on top of the other: this seems obvious. But one of the fundamental elements which contribute to identity seems to be the individual identity which is set up through psychogenesis.*

*As a clinical psychologist having to treat pathologies and having to deal with suffering, you realise that the question of identity must first of all be seen in these terms, and that social identity, the fact of knowing you are Zulu or Xhosa or Indian or Tamil — this is a problem to be treated at a later point.*

*The question then is that of establishing an intersubjective human link as such within ontogenesis. This seems to me to be the cornerstone of the identity of the subject as such. This is where problems can arise; problems can arise in the relationship between the mother and the child, for example, if the groups where these problems arise no longer have, in a sense, the socio-affective means to make it possible to set up a relationship with the child. For example, there can be violent acts, or impulsive actions, or there can be a lack of affection which exists not only because the person has, as we say, personal or psychological problems, but also because he or she is part of a group in which the foundations of interpersonal reaction do not exist as fundamental values.*

*That is why I've spoken of a "loss of ethical and moral values." So the question of identity can have an effect on, wear away, erode, directly damage the very elements of the subject's personality before becoming a social fact, that's to say before becoming an element of the community or an element of the linguistic policy or of the economic structure.*

*(...) inaudible question*

— **Jean-Pierre CAMBEFORT** : Il n'y a pas de construction identitaire individuelle qui ne passe par l'inscription du sujet dans une démarche temporelle. Un sujet humain ne peut pas avancer vers un avenir, vers un futur, même s'il est décidé par les politologues ou par les hommes d'État, s'il n'inscrit pas son histoire personnelle dans celle d'un groupe dont la mémoire est conservée et qui lui permet de fonder son avancée future sur ce qu'on appelle des archives mentales ou l'histoire d'une famille. Et justement, il y a souvent perte de cette mémoire, dans les communautés issues du métissage, prolétarisées et qui ont subi ce que j'appelle, moi, une "lobotomie culturelle".

*The individual cannot construct his identity unless this takes place within a time structure. A human subject cannot move towards the future, even if such a future has been decided by politicians or statesmen, unless his personal history is part of that of a group the memory of which has been preserved and which makes it possible to base his future progression on what we can call the mental archives or the family history. There is precisely very often this loss of memory in communities of mixed origin, proletarian communities which have undergone what I would call a "cultural lobotomy."*

*(...) inaudible question*

— **Jean-Pierre CAMBEFORT** : Il y a une reconstitution imaginaire, absolument, mais justement, comme elle est imaginaire, je ne dirais pas elle n'est pas fondée, mais elle est fondée sur une reconstruction après-coup, c'est-à-dire les gens sont en quête de nouvelles identités. C'est vrai que mon papier est organisé en fonction d'une problématique réunionnaise et que je pense que l'intérêt de la méthode comparative serait d'appliquer certains travaux qui ont été faits sur les communautés à la Réunion à l'Afrique du Sud pour obtenir des données comparatives. Je pense, je n'en ai pas parlé, aux *Coloureds* du Cap : ces 2 millions de personnes qui sont issues des premiers métissages et dont la langue maternelle est l'Afrikaans, ce qui est tout à fait étonnant. Il y aurait beaucoup de choses à développer, dans une perspective comparative, entre les créoles réunionnais ou mauriciens, les créoles des Mascareignes, et les *Coloureds* du Cap, sur le plan de l'identité, des images parentales, etc.. (...)



*There is, it is true, an imaginary history, but precisely as it is a product of the imagination, I would not say that it has no foundation, but rather that it is based on a retrospective vision, that is to say, people are in search of a new identity. It's true, my paper treats basically the Reunionese issue and I believe that it would be interesting, using the comparative method, to apply to South Africa certain work which has been carried out on communities in La Réunion in order to obtain comparative data. I haven't mentioned it yet but I'm thinking of the Cape Coloureds: the two million people who are the result of the initial racial mixing and whose mother tongue is Afrikaans, which is totally astonishing. There would be a lot to say if we wanted to compare the Creoles in La Réunion, or in Mauritius, the Mascareignes Creoles, and the Cape Coloureds as regards identity, parental images, etc..*



*(after "Multiculturalism in Early South African Writing," by Ian GLENN, University of Cape Town; "Le problème identitaire dans les littératures de l'Afrique du Sud : de l'orgueil à la honte", by Jean SEVRY, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III; "Ethnic Consciousness and Multiculturalism in Njabulo Ndebele's fiction," by Lokangaka LOSAMBE, University of Fort Hare)*

— **Zoe EISENSTEIN**, ERASMUS student, University of SUSSEX (U. K.): this is about the talk given by Professor Glenn. A few points I'd like to make about your talk.

The first is: when you said that we're shocked by multiculturalism, I don't know, I don't know if that's true really of myself and I don't know if that's true of a multicultural audience such as this one, and maybe your reference to shock could have been a mere... a mere mirror of your own, maybe your own feelings, I don't know, it's only a suggestion?... Well, it's a possibility...

And also, when you talk about the emergence of multiculturalism, do you then mean that there was a time when such a thing as monoculturalism (...) by talking about a time when multiculturalism began or do you talk about a time when it didn't exist?

Also, when you talk about the British Army writing texts, which were... which spoke negatively about colonialism, would you add anything to expand on maybe the motives or the reasons for being negative? And also, from these texts, who knew about these texts, who read these texts in order for them to affect the emergence of multiculturalism? How could these texts — I mean, I've never read them, how have they affected everyone's perception of multiculturalism, how they made... people multiculturalist? Who had access to these texts?

And also, I found, I mean, it was a very interesting talk, I'd like to have a more forward thinking, maybe I'll expect till the end, it'd be interesting though if you could maybe expand now? Thank you.

— Ian GLENN: I hope I can remember all three, I'll try... The question of being shocked, I suppose, is yeah... maybe I'm shocked, but I suspect we're all shocked (...) you know there are limits to multiculturalism, I mean, we're working within limits that aren't evident to us and if I broke the rules by speaking a language whether it were, you know, *Malgache* or Afrikaans, or something it wasn't, one's tolerance would pretty soon get strained, I suspect and I think any culture where — I mean as in France, the Muslim fundamentalists — there are issues where any culture's tolerance of difference becomes strained quite quickly and I think "tout le monde est bien, tout le monde est gentil," it's easy to forget that, but in fact... it's true, cultures work by excluding as much as anything else it's a hard truth and I don't think we forget that... what I'm trying to say, what I think my paper was trying to say is there is a moment when it's easy to imagine multiculturalism as something which is always going to be there, and always win, I think History shows us that there was a time when a multicultural effort was there but it got displaced because of powerful economic, social interests and forces and I don't want us to forget that. I think also my point about multiculturalism now is: I made that addition to the text, where I talked about a hard multiculturalism and a soft multiculturalism: I think South Africa is now at that point of strain where there are various strong groups so there isn't a dominant group in the sense that we have two anthems, but I think France, I mean... I don't mean to comment unfavourably on Reunion, but there was something very interesting last night when we heard poetry in Creole and we were told even five or ten years ago, such a manifestation would have been impossible, it would have been regarded as disruptive. Now my question is: why can that take place now? Isn't that because in a sense things have settled enough for that to happen, not because in fact, because the power is now sure enough of itself to allow that rather than that in

fact it is a major reshuffling of powers, a major re-questioning of powers. I'm trying to look at the conditions under which one can be multicultural, and what the limits of that are, I think that's really the extent of that question.

I think the question of what happened to multiculturalism is — and the critique I was developing in the end which we could talk about a lot longer — some of you might be working on travel writing... There is a very influential book by someone called Marie-Louise Pratt, called "The Imperial Eye" and the argument of that book is very much that the western gaze was a sort of monolithic imperialising gaze and it's very much drawing on people like Said, you know the orientalism is the one discourse. Now I want to say: look, wait a bit... look at Diderot, look at "Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville." In fact, you have another strong historical discourse and what I was trying to show today is that strong historical discourse nearly wins. In England, people nearly said: "take the British Army out, we support the cause." So in fact, there are big historical stakes. But as interests come into place, settler interests, you discover diamond, the British say: "We want to be in South Africa," other interests, other discourses displace that. So I think, you know, we go back to the Greeks, or the Barbarians or the people on the outside, and I think South African writing has had to keep rethinking that issue of... we've talked from the beginning, from Sinfree Makoni's talk about boundaries, and insiders and outsiders (...)

— **Peter HAWKINS**, Guest Professor, University of Bristol (U. K.): I'd like to ask a question to Jean Sévry but also to the other speakers. While listening to the three papers, I was asking myself an all too obvious question: isn't the literary institution itself a kind of "identity-maker machine"? In other words, the social function of the literary institution, by choosing this or that text, the banning of other texts, especially those mentioned by Mr. Glenn, which have not been transmitted, which have been forgotten, for all too obvious reasons... I was a little bit shocked by what M. Sévry said, that identity can be found everywhere and anywhere. On the contrary, I think identity can be found in literature, in the creation of the literary institution.

— **Tyrone SAVAGE**, *University of Cape Town student, lecteur in the Département d'Etudes Anglophones de l'Université de la Réunion* : I have two questions. But firstly, I'd like to thank Professor Losambé for having accepted me as a

fellow-African. My first question is to Professor Sévry: I refer to the quotation with which you closed your presentation "Whites are whites and they must learn to listen, blacks are blacks, they must learn to speak." This communication, this black self-expression and white openness may be needful, but I would like to ask: in what language will this communication take place? Or more precisely, in whose language?

— **Jean SEVRY**: in whose language? That was your question? It depends, it depends... in some cases, English would fit in beautifully, in other cases township English, in other cases Zulu, it depends, or even Afrikaans... Zoe Wycomb says she wants now Coloured people to write in Afrikaans, so — in Cape Afrikaans — my answer would be — I don't know whether that would satisfy you — in any language, provided it fits you. Remember, some writers keep shifting from one language to the other (...)

— **Lokangaka LOSAMBE**: I wanted to comment first on the statements, the original statements. Blacks have always had a language, they have been speaking and I don't think they should learn to speak anybody's language. In addition to that, what I want to say is that people have been producing a literature since the beginning of the world, Blacks have been producing their own literature orally, and also in the written form. Literary research has really been done in that respect. In addition to that, the issue of language is also an issue that is current in African literature. Now, people who feel that they have internalised the competence, that they have developed a certain competence in that language to be able to use it effectively, for a creative practice, why not do that? To what extent, for instance, would you say that Soyinka, the African writer who got the Nobel Prize, to what extent are you going to say that his work is not African because he is using English? In fact, his work is marked by European mythology from the beginning to the end (...) If you're familiar with that mythology, you see how it is completely influenced by that and how it is African by so doing (...)

— **Gabeba ABRAHAMS**: I have got a question for Professor Glenn and it's in connection with your topic really which covers these selected sympathetic views and praise of indigenous people through writings which emphasise that. Now, really, it surprises me because there are many writings (...) in which the description of the indigenous people... they described us barbaric, uncivilised, noble

savages, etc., etc. ... I was just wondering: can you remark on that? And also tell me why this highlighting of these sympathetic views being the case that you state here? And none/not of the other side?

— **Ian GLENN**: Yes, there is obviously a long historical context that one needs to talk about. I would want to say that, you know, I'm highlighting first of all a certain selective historical view; and there's an irony in this that with the people with a racist or a sort of fairly racist set the ideology which repressed or excluded a sympathetic view of the Blacks to start with, and now in a sense that view has been thoroughly internalised by people who were very hostile to the view. That's the sort of irony I'm trying to point at in the first place, so that in fact even people now want to point back and instead of saying, looking back and saying: "Look, if I am a young black South African, there's more in early South African literature than Olive Schreiner" (...) there are views of black South Africans which are very positive... So I think I'm trying to re-push down one side of a scale which has been neglected thoroughly. All we've heard about, and all we've assumed existed is a sort of racist stereotype (...) Even when one looks at the issue of what is a noble savage, I think one uses that phrase very easily — I get more and more puzzled by it, you know (...) There's a lot of intellectual history we have to un-pick (...)

— **Sifree MAKONI**: I'd like to make just about two remarks (...) Professor Losambé talked about African literature and whether, for instance, the literature that is written in English in Africa is African literature. I'd like to look at that issue from a slightly different perspective. I'd like to argue that while Losambé is right to say that English is an African language, it is an African language inasmuch as any language that is used in Africa, as an indigenous language. Historically, due to the spread of English all over the world, the ownership of English does not reside in either Britain or the States, it resides with whoever uses and practices it, wherever they are. So English is a perfect African language. What it simply means is that there are different varieties of English. So if you have to operate in English, you need to be able to move from one different level to the other, depending on the context in which you are in. So if somebody asks you: how many African languages do you speak? You can count English and say that it is one of them.

