

FROM “TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY” TO “DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT”: SOME RECENT WRITING ON MANAGING THE WORKFORCE

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There lies great danger in the facile use of such generalising terms as “*the African worker*”, “*the African village*”, “*the Afrikaner*”. This applies to everyday life and many other situations; no less so for political practice and social understanding. The employment of such homogenising and essentialising notions often stand in the way of analysis of otherwise complex issues and of appropriate intervention.

The use of such terms reminds me of the 1925 book that I found in the local library recently, **The Essential Kafir** (Kidd 1925), immediately “balanced” by the equally essentialising **The British: Their psychology and destiny** (Stein 1990 - first published in 1958, and not clear where the demand for a reprint should have come from). Stein is actually writing about “*the English*” (excluding in his descriptions the internal colonial fringe of Wales, Scotland and Ireland), to whose male members are attributed such gems as: “His physical attributes make the Englishman a conqueror; but his conquests proceed in phlegmatic actions”; and “It is impossible to understand the English attitude without realising that the English mind is all the time either emerging from the spiritual world in an approach to the material world or withdrawing from the material world to a point of observation outside of space and time”. Now where have I heard such attributions recently?

Kidd operated, at times, in the same fashion: “A Native never commits himself if he can possibly help it”. However, he also acknowledged, much more so than is to be found in several more recent accounts of cultural difference, that his picture is a composite one (an ideal type, so to speak), and does not apply to any one “tribe”. Nor did he claim a static picture in his portrayal of *custom*, to be distinguished from supposed innate, and hence static, attributes: “Some of the customs long ago became obsolete, and others have undergone great modification through the influence of Europeans”. And this written in the early 20th century.

What do these two random references have to do with reading some recent writing on topics such as “African management”, and a number of other books giving wide advice on the changing workplace in the new South Africa? Attributing essential cultural and psychological traits to people (most often to black South Africans, the majority of the workforce, although stereotyping is certainly not limited to any one social group) lies close to the surface of much writing, discussion and everyday common sense discourse

in South Africa. Political pronouncements in our society are replete with such instances, as are newspaper reports and editorial reflections.

In 1999 two industrial relations practitioners, from their surnames one white and one black, told listeners to the Tim Modise show (on SAFM 104-107, “the station for the well-informed”) that black African workers have a very different concept of time (obviously from the one that they, the speakers, hold, or that is expected by the managers for whom they consult and to whom they give talks). Within this conception punctuality did not matter much, and a sense of the future was absent (a “circular notion of time prevailed in the African world view”, it was said with the confidence that is necessitated by the seminars they address)! Their, no doubt lucrative, task was to *interpret* these perceptions, to *mediate* the world (and worldviews) of the exotic other, to the people who are concerned to get the best out of the people in question. They had to present this alien culture, and the implications of such “different” thought patterns for the workplace and for profits, to employers in words and diagrams that they could understand. Two young callers pointed out that this static and essentialising picture totally ignored context (where transport and spatial location could go a long way to explaining late arrival at work), and that if true, Africa was in effect being wiped off the slate of global productive competitiveness. But then, that shared (often by black and white) perception is given the weight of the printed word when Hennie J Groenewald (1996:14), writes that “In African cultures, the mere fact of attending the event [‘appointments, meetings or social events’] is far more important than the time of arrival”.

This simplistic, confirmatory (of stereotypes) common sense, demands vigorous debate. For example, if we ask for greater sensitivity, and acknowledgement of diversity, is it about cultural continuities (and even racialised essentialism), or is it about context and change in cultural practices? How different are these arguments from those made during the apartheid years? It is with questions such as these in mind that I looked at some of the books and contributions to books on issues of difference and diversity in the workplace, or to other issues that relate to the workplace. Both are to be found, although it must be said that the former (fixed difference) dominates, even if only implicitly, in the general tenor of the contributions.

The plethora of publications from **Knowledge Resources** (publishers of most of the books referred to here) cash in on the concern with “diversity management”, and the legislative demands for redress of past discrimination and concerns over “diversity” in the workplace. I have focused, primarily, on the racialised differences that appear, for the reason that this is the most contentious continuity from apartheid classification and essentialist common sense, and because “race” serves as shorthand for “cultural” difference, and, of course, the other way around (see, for example, Potgieter 1996).

Acknowledging the danger of simplification, there are two extreme recognisable approaches to “industrial relations” in South Africa. Here it must be noted that industrial relations is a term employed in a manner that is not the same as “capitalist social relations of production”. Rather it is used similar to the idea of “race relations” which arise from an acceptance of the existence of “races”. So “industrial relations” does not arise out of the existence of “classes” in the workplace - something that does not exist,

except in the form of “employer” and “employee”, sometimes simply as culturally diverse groups who have been brought together for the purposes of production.

The first approach is that cultural differences separate a majority black work force and largely white managers. Anthropologists, black managers or personnel practitioners, or other cultural gurus will then interpret the world of the black worker to the rational (white western) capitalists, and interpret and appropriately mediate supervision, control and instructions downwards. A breakdown of communication (as was said by employers to have happened before the 1973 strikes in Natal (IIE 1974:78-79)) can then be blamed for conflict, tension or low productivity. There is not one single employer response to this perspective, but the crudest and extensive earlier form was to employ culturally appropriate supervisors (such as *izinduna*), ethnically separate (and obviously race-exclusive) hostels and compounds (see, for example, Hemson 1979). Such extreme versions of separation, based on notions of primordial differences and antagonisms, gave rise to or allowed an enormous amount of conflict, whether it was in the well-publicised (in the 1970s) “faction fighting” on the mines, or conflict on the docks in Durban.

The other perspective is to argue that mining, agricultural and industrial capitalism has reshaped the South African economic landscape and people for some 200 years. Despite cultural differences, often artificially maintained in static and hence inappropriate form, workers share the demands, discipline and exploitation of the capitalist workplace. Therefore, organisations of *workers* (rather than of race or cultural groups) are best able to interpret that world, the world of work, and represent the interests of workers and confront management control and capitalist exploitation through trade unions.

The closer the theorists move to the first position, of essentialised or homogeneous social identities, the less mention there appears to be of the system of capitalism (for example, arguing that “diversity management” should be engaged in to improve the “bottom line”, yet another euphemism that serves its obfuscatory purpose in the land of euphemism - such as in “the demographics of the country”). The closer to the second, the less mention there tends to be of “cultural diversity”, and the more of the overthrow of capitalism (such as during and after the May 2000 strikes against unemployment and retrenchments, from the members of the ANC, and from the SACP and COSATU). Of course it is not possible to locate all the contributions to the books mentioned here clustered at the first pole, although most are to found at that end of the spectrum. There are exceptions, such as when Kole Omotoso asks for an “African modernisation”, but roots it in strong criticism of contemporary capitalism: “Having lost its concern for the human condition, capitalism has become less and less fit for human consumption” (Omotoso, 1996:164).

What allows such a simplication, as I would argue it is? It arises, in the first instance, out of the extreme separation between white and black, through apartheid, and from the industrial relations practices that were to be found there. From here it is an easy step to start from “difference”, rather than from “diversity”, employing these terms in the manner suggested by Jo Beall in her discussion of urban development policy (1997). Beall writes that “our understanding of *difference* derives much from debates amongst feminists over differences between women and men and among women themselves”.

But even here it was not an exclusive recognition but one that recognised the intersection of gender with “other social relations deriving from class, race, ethnicity, age and so on” (1997:7).

However, Beall argues, when we move from social analysis to “the practice of social development”, we have to recognise that the notion of difference tends to lock people into distinct categories, and can be employed in a top-down fashion of categorisation, that at worst “can imply discrimination or even social engineering” (1997:9). And it is in apartheid, with its recognition, and reward, of difference, that we see her worst-case scenario. It is in social practice, the *process* of social development, that we need to *diversify*, implying “a more dynamic and flexible concept than the static one of *difference*” (1997:9). It is not just that the apartheid past locks us into emphasising static cultures, or starting off from a perspective of the common sense of difference, but that the present, in the form of the global victory of capitalism means that issues of power can be remarkably absent from these discussions.

THE APARTHEID PAST: FIXING DIFFERENCE, DENYING CHANGE.

Apartheid was a political and social system that rested firmly on notions of ethnic (and racial) characteristics. Instead of “racial nationalism”, said a National Party cabinet minister in 1959: “There are things greater which must bind Peoples together ... the spiritual treasures, the cultural treasures of a People ... Thus we say that our basis of approach is that the Bantu too will be linked together by traditional and emotional bonds, by their own language, their own culture, their ethnic particularities” (quoted in Moodie 1975:265). Industrial relations during the apartheid years, to the limited extent to which it could be said to have departed from white racial or racist *baasskap*, often relied on these essentialised or primordial notions of difference. Of course, it was not a fully static picture, sometimes reflecting demands imposed on reluctant (and a few more far-sighted) employers by an ever-more confident working class, by economic decline and falling profits, and by demands for new skills and an extended skills base. In addition the parameters and the prescriptions set by the state through labour legislation, itself largely through worker pressure, such as after the 1973 strikes, put new demands on reluctant employers. Before turning to the democratic order and apparent new developments, let us look at elements of that past.

While trade unions for black workers were never banned, despite several claims to the contrary, unionists were prosecuted, incarcerated, banned, harassed, tortured and killed during the apartheid years, and the unions that existed were excluded from the official industrial relations system until the late-1970s. It was an uphill struggle to maintain some semblance of trade union organisation, and the externally-based SACTU fared little better in giving coherence to the South African working class. It was only from the early-1970s that organisations of the working class took form again, and slowly over the next decade gained the strength that made them a powerful force in the destruction of apartheid in the 1980s and within the reconstruction that was to follow (Friedman 1987).

Employers relied to a large extent on the authority that lay outside of the workplace, the authority placed or maintained over “subjects”. This was especially, but not exclusively the case in labour-intensive, migrant labour industries - stevedoring (Hemson 1979), mining (Moodie 1980; James 1992), and even agriculture (Maré and Hamilton 1998). *Izinduna* mediated the authority of employers, drawing on the maintained relics of the

past, the *amakhosi* (chiefs) - "traditional" authority in the modern workplace, for workers who were perceived to be "traditional" still, a century after the discovery of diamonds, 80 years after the discovery of commercially exploited gold, and decades after industrialisation in the country. These were the people described as the "subjects", rather than the "citizens", of the colonial system (see Mamdani 1996), mobilised as warriors *and* workers by the Zulu ethnic elite in one of the ethnic units of apartheid South Africa (Waetjen and Maré 1999).

These were workers [apartheid never denied the movement of black people essential for labour, despite the enforcement of spatial segregation (Hindson 1987)], but they were workers who carried various kinds of attributed differences with them - cultural, racialised, in terms of ability, etc. For both workers and especially employers, migrancy made rural life, and the baggage of traditional authority and cultural and racialised difference available and appear appropriate to certain circumstances around the world of work. Mamdani's (1996) distinction between (politically included) citizen and (dominated) subject, went beyond a spatial and administrative divide, and extended to the perceived psychological make-up of the migrant workers.

It was a short step to build on the differences that were employed in differentiated authority structures and to suggest that those differences could also play a role in social control and productivity increases. In a short article published in 1976, Witwatersrand University social anthropologist, David Webster, noted the influence of anthropological approaches to workplace understanding. Here the name of Peter Becker stands out, "an 'internationally acclaimed expert on African customs, beliefs, history and languages'", employed then in advertising and "consulted by industry on African affairs" (Webster, 1976:53). This is how Webster describes the experts' "sympathetic, but 'paternal' liberal position":

"Analytically, the two writers [Becker and E Raymond Silberbauer] are poverty-stricken. They lack any kind of theoretical framework which could lend strength to their arguments, and their presentation is consequently episodic, anecdotal, and relies entirely on apt illustration for the points being made. Silberbauer often prefaces his little homilies on worker communication by reference to 'the African'. Becker veers widely from personal anecdote to sweeping generalisation; one wonders just how much weight one can attach to their assertions" (1976:53).

There is much in this summary that can be addressed at the door of contributors such as Ronnie Lessem, Lovemore Mbigi, and Peter Christie, and certainly also to note the absence of any consideration of different power relations, as was the case in the writing considered by Webster. Maybe the biggest difference is that while Becker and Silberbauer suggested that employers should accept African workers as "hide-bound by custom" with "patience and fortitude", as Webster puts it, in the new South Africa employers should accept such cultural difference with joy and employ it in the service of international market competitiveness (for example, Thomas 1996; Mbigi 1997). It must be added, too, that Christie wishes deliberately to elevate "the anecdotal storyteller" to good leadership (1996:29), with a list of "storytellers, that includes Sol Kerzner ("We need our own black Sol Kerzner", writes Mbigi a year later - 1997:32), Harry Oppenheimer and Thabo Mbeki (Christie 1996:27-28). Not surprisingly, then, Christie's book consists almost exclusively of supportive anecdotes.

“MANAGING DIVERSITY” IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE.

It would be fairly easy to draw continuities from the picture painted above to the notions of difference that appear in many of the contributions of more recent origin. However, that would be only part of the picture. There are such continuities, but there are also exceptions to that trend (Human 1996, and Potgieter 1996, stand out in the degree of complexity they introduce to their arguments). In addition, there are also important contributions to what is necessary in a changing workplace, and the demands for redress of the racist and racialised past.

From the reference that I made, above, to Beall’s distinction between “difference” and “diversity”, the reader will gather that I would argue that what goes through for “diversity management” (a growth area in employment, undoubtedly given an extra boost through the requirement for “employment equity managers” in the Employment Equity Act), is actually mostly a policy based on “differentiation and management”. A clear line is drawn, in this approach, between “African” attributes (that could then be employed in management style, as well as the management *of* workers), and Eurocentric rationalism. Here Lessem would add, for purposes of symmetrical and diagrammatic neatness and the appearance of complexity, the four points of the compass, each with its own attributes (see Lessem 1993, 1996). What is noticeable both in Lessem’s approach, as well as that of Christie (1996) and Mbigi (1997), is that the African (humanist, convivial, communal) pole is defined in terms predominantly of *pre-capitalist* attributes, whereas the other poles are located in supposed different styles of *capitalist* management (those of the European, rational north, brought to South Africa through the Huguenots; the United States as pragmatic west, and holism of the Japanese east). It is important to note the degree of repetition and mutual acknowledgement between, especially, these three authors.

What is drawn from “Africa”? Obviously, *ubuntu*, and to a lesser extent “*the extended family*”. To *ubuntu* many of the authors pay service: *umuntu ngumuntu nganye abantu* and variations (people are people because of other people) are often repeated (for example Groenewald 1996:21; Shutte 1996:33; Saayman and Kritzinger 1996:38; and obviously Mbigi 1997). It would demand another article to gain, first, the range of understandings of *ubuntu* employed by the various authors; second, the continental and primordial origins ascribed to it; and, third, the contortions to relate the concept to everything from religion to affirmative action. “Extended family” serves a similar role, with notions of integration, implying that the firm similarly could serve as “community” (Lessem 1996:201). Here, too, there is an exception, in another discussion that *contextualises* culture, locating the extended family as appropriately understood within the context of “pre-colonial African customary law” (Bennett 1996:77).

And then, in addition, there are a range of more generalised characteristics of “traditional African communities” (Mbigi 1997:18; Koopman 1993:49, 1991) that distinguish them from us, or us from them (depending on the “racial” location of the author), that are utilised to serve new styles of management. Important are characteristics such as “consensus” (but also respect for authority, and here I cannot but hear the voice of chief Buthelezi explaining “African democracy” in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly!); “freedom of expression and tolerance of diversity” that were “key elements of village democracy in indigenous Africa” (Mbigi 1997:25); “warmth”

(Lessem speaking through Christie 1996:16); the “hunter’s spirit - the spirit of African entrepreneurship” (Mbigi 1997:32); and many, many more.

If competitiveness is the most frequently expressed motivation for adopting “African management”, then the most frequent absence is complexity, a sense that social identities, customs, cultures adapt dynamically to different circumstances. Sometimes these changes are to be regretted and signify a real loss of diversity (such as when languages are sidelined or stultify through lack of support and the need to constantly change to speak within new situations), and at other times the fixing of customs can marginalise people - from power and benefits. Here the contrast of contributions such as those by Lessem and Christie with that by Human (1996) is stark. Human, for example, in discussing “diversity management”, notes that “the emphasis has been generally on what makes people different rather than what they share in common”, as well as an “emphasis on traditional “culture” rather than on multiple and changing social identities” (1996:171). She also draws attention to another striking absence in most of these contributions, namely that “conformity with traditional cultural values is often situational” (1996:177). Such an approach allows her to express scepticism on the chances of success (and, hence, desirability) of “attempts to move to a so-called “African style of management” (which would) appear to be as doomed to failure as attempts to import so-called “Japanese styles of management” from their country of origin” (1996:179).

Other (not so strange) absences are notions of power, indicating the theoretical poverty of the decontextual appropriation of ideas such as “*ubuntu*”, “communal”, etc. It struck this reader that the employment of notions of power, and conflict arising out of the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, came from authors writing on trade unions and on the working class (rather than on “employees” and “employers” or “management”) [see, for example, Maller 1993; Philip 1993; and the contributions to Innes *et al* (eds) 1993] - obvious once noted, but stark in the contrasting perspectives on the workplace. Class and gender were, therefore, unsurprisingly also absent from the “anecdotal” contributions.

CONCLUSION.

It might be stating the obvious, which does not deny the need at times to state it, that “diversity management” to a large degree denies the primacy of common experience of workers in the capitalist workplace. Webster already noted this in 1976, when he commented on similar writing: “Why should a black worker be so different from any other worker?” (1976:61). It is argued in this approach that while there are workers or, rather, employees “in themselves” (agents structured into the workplace), there are cultural groups of people “for themselves”. Diversity is also perceived to be “knowable”, through their “coherent emotional *curriculum vitae*”, in the workplace, as Mary Evans describes such claims to knowledge (1999:23). This “diversity” (actually difference) has to be addressed in order to reconcile difference with the single need of management for market competitiveness (profit).

What is also, often, unacknowledged is that social identities (of which culture is an important aspect) are changing. What was appropriate and common centuries, or even decades, ago, can no longer be recaptured in its pristine and socially appropriate form, and in many cases attempts at recovery of cultural practices are not even desirable,

even if possible. As Beall (1997) argues, in the practice of policy such approaches peripheralise people and potentially increase conflict.

What is excluded from diversity management may actually be as important as what is commonsensically included: why not address the implications of crude materialism and consumerism, amongst the old and new bourgeoisie and the upper echelons of the consulting, civil service and political classes? Do we know the extent and social implications of depersonalisation that occurs when things are put above people, when profits (“the bottom line”, as it is so delicately put) count for more than poverty-alleviation, when diversity (actually difference) is confirmed, maintained and manipulated as crudely as was “tribal difference” in the mining industry. The “employers” and their managers and consultants are, for obvious reasons, much more effective at keeping their own private sphere, the globally-shared culture of the rich, and their social identities, out of the workplace and out of public examination (no **Knowledge Resources** books on this aspect). What it means is that the existing power relations in the workplace remain unchallenged.

With Employment Equity and Affirmative Action legislated, the need for addressing “diversity in the workplace” has become even more pressing, at least as presented implicitly and explicitly within many contributions to these books - although not placing themselves within the long, and often sordid, tradition of such work in the South African workplace. In addition, usually racialised, “diversity” has become a commodity, or an essential aspect of the commodity labour power in a democratic South Africa, that can, and must, be purchased to achieve the correct “demographics”, the “social representativeness”, and ultimately the “quotas” (“targets”, to avoid the term quota) of the racially diverse workplace. From there it is a short step to “diversity *management*”.

Let me conclude with a final example of how some of these writings and the commodification of colour (of racialised difference) come together. Human *et al* (where the “*et al*” consists of two human resource people from SA Breweries) in their contribution to employment equity implementation (1999:12), offer advice on how to “bake a new cake”, which includes the gem that “social interaction between individuals sharing common interests on the basis of shared understanding instead of stereotypes” should occur “e.g. in pubs”! The SAB advertisements, with which South African viewers are all too familiar, speak volumes on various masculinist stereotypes, and the careful maintenance of the demographics of difference in their colour coded scenarios of alcohol-induced joviality.

How will race, for we are talking here of *racialised* diversity, ameliorate the effects of capitalism here at the tip of Africa? Will black managers, or white managers employing “African management styles”, work against the trend of a “lost concern for the human condition”, as Omotoso put it? What do new captains of industry, such as Cyril Ramaphosa or Nthatho Motlana or Thami Mazwai bring, to take just three iconic names of empowerment, other than the political clout of the new order and the ability to produce profits? I must admit that I remain unconvinced that what most of the authors to these books provide is anything but meeting a need of those who fall for the simplified argument, and whose interests are certainly not met by addressing *worker* interests.

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