

FOCUS On Ethnic Studies

Volume 2, Spring 2003



*Postcards
from*

South Africa

Welcome to Focus - the second issue of the ethnic studies club newsletter.

South Africa and its neighboring country, Zimbabwe, are near and dear to my heart. I resided in both of these countries during the 1990s and my experiences in these nations dramatically changed the views and ideas that I had about Africa and Africans. The media portrays Africa as a poverty-stricken, politically unstable, disease-ridden nation, and characterizes its people as brutal savages. While poverty, inadequate education, and political instability are very real problems in many African nations, these characteristics do not typify Africa as a whole.

Civilization as Americans know it does exist in Africa. South Africa, like the rest of the nations in Africa, has cities with buildings, skyscrapers, shops, and malls. A Zambian Solano Community College student, Billie Jean, told me that if she could change one idea that Americans have about Africa it would be that it is *not* an uncivilized place. She said, "It's like here, only we don't have as much money to do as much as you do, but it's just like here!"

It had been my intention to present solely positive images of South Africa in this newsletter to help counter-balance the onslaught of the media's negative coverage. The inclusion of the AIDS article, however, attenuates that goal. The AIDS threat is an alarmingly real one and ignoring it will not improve the status quo. What is written is shocking and unfortunately not exaggerated. The intention is to increase the readers' awareness of this catastrophic situation, which is debilitating this growing country.

What amazes me about the parts of Africa that I have come to know is that in the face of

devastation beyond our conception – like the AIDS crisis – social qualities of life which are sorely lacking in much of American society remain strong in African nations and cultures. Dr. F. Jeffress Ramsay states in his book, *Africa*: "the art of personal relationships continues to be important..... children are considered precious, elders are an important part of a household; nursing homes and retirement communities do not exist." Although the United States is a superpower, African nations have valuable lessons to teach us. We would do well to become pupils in African social schools. - **Elizabeth Veldsman**



Elizabeth Veldsman in Eastern Cape Province, standing next to the tallest tree in South Africa.

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AIDS Crisis Worsens in South Africa

By Charles Fannan

Chronic poverty, prostitution, sexual assaults, and governmental rigidity have exacerbated the already catastrophic AIDS problem in South Africa. According to a United Nations AIDS Report, about 5 million South Africans (1 out of 9) are infected with HIV or have AIDS. Half of all adults who contract the virus become infected before age 25 and usually die before their 35th birthdays. New infections among the young will have a devastating effect in South Africa, where 53% of the population is under 25.

A Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS Report revealed that the percentage of HIV infections increased nationally from 4.6% in 1997 to 8.7% in 2001. While the proportion of male mortality due to HIV infections jumped from 3.9% in 1997 to 7.6% in 2001, the percentage of female deaths rose dramatically from 5.6% in 1997 to 9.8% in 2000, making HIV infection the leading cause of death among South African women.

The troubling disparity between the number of male and female deaths from AIDS has severely compounded the AIDS dilemma in South Africa. With fewer women to raise children, the fate of this struggling nation is even more uncertain. One of the contributing factors to this troubling problem is prostitution. According to a South African study, relatively few prostitutes make their clients use condoms because doing so increases the chances that they will either be beaten or will lose their clients to less cautious competitors. Children as young as eight have been forced into prostitution to survive.

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Women in South Africa face another appalling problem: they are oftentimes the victims of sexual assault. South African authorities reported that there were 21,000 child rapes and 37,000 adult rapes, making South Africa the rape capital of the world. The authorities also declared that only one in 35 rapes are actually reported, possibly making the actual number of rapes in excess of one million per year.

Many assailants are raping children in an attempt to avoid apprehension and to avoid HIV infection. Many others rape children because they believe that having sex with a virgin will cure a person of HIV/AIDS. This myth is prevalent in Africa, India, and the Caribbean. "According to the virgin cleansing myth (in South Africa), a man can 'cleanse' his blood of HIV/AIDS through intercourse with a virgin," says Suzanne Leclerc Madlala, an anthropologist at the University of Natal.

Socio-economic factors have also taken their toll on this developing country. Severe food shortages, spawned by pervasive poverty, have synergistically combined with the AIDS explosion and further decimated the South African population. This dismal economic state has left 15 million people in this troubled region in need of food. The lack of food has decreased productivity and heightened the progression of AIDS. "When the body has no food to consume, the virus consumes the body," said Stephen Lewis, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Although South Africa is a middle-income country with a plentiful supply of resources, well-

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AIDS Crisis Worsens in South Africa (continued)

developed financial, legal, communications, energy, and transport sectors, severe poverty, which has affected many regions of South Africa, is perhaps the most intractable causative factor of the AIDS crisis. The Department for International Development has determined that Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland have a total population of 46 million, 7 million of which live below the international poverty line of \$1 a day and 18 million of which live below \$2 a day – most of these unfortunate citizens live in South Africa. These poor people are less able to buy food, clothing, shelter, and anti-retroviral medication that can prolong their lives and reduce the suffering associated with AIDS.

In the midst of this turmoil, Thabo Mbeki, the Prime Minister of South Africa, has been sharply denounced for his government's AIDS policies and for employing advisors who reject the widely accepted theory that HIV causes AIDS. When asked whether HIV causes AIDS during a 2000 interview, Mbeki replied "...I am saying you cannot attribute immune deficiency solely and exclusively to a virus. [There is] a whole variety of things [that] can cause the immune system to collapse," he said. He made reference to endemic poverty, malnutrition, contaminated water, and repeated infections of malaria or STDs as factors that could result in immune deficiency.

However, in 2002, Mbeki's regime conceded that there was a correlation between HIV and AIDS and agreed to work with pharmaceutical companies to arrange the importation of low-cost anti-retroviral therapeutics into South Africa. Many believe that the government had no choice but to change its opinion in respect to the cause of AIDS because of pressure from campaigners, the

scientific community, doctors, and the international community.

In October of 2002, Merck and Company, a large U.S. pharmaceutical corporation, agreed to introduce a new 600 mg. tablet formulation of Stocrin, a potent anti-retroviral medication, at a price of US \$0.95 per day in the most impoverished countries and those most afflicted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The formulation involves taking one tablet a day rather than three capsules and will simplify treatment regimens and further reduce overall cost.

The cooperation of the Mbeki regime in the fight against HIV infection and the better availability of effective HIV/AIDS drugs will definitely improve the lives of many people in South Africa, but more steps must be taken if South Africa is to overcome this crisis.



Zanelle Mngadi, 29, and her infant child, are both HIV positive.

Lessons South Africa Can Teach America

By Elizabeth Veldsman

Seeing a photograph of Malibongwe Maketa and Thobela Jemsana playing cricket on a South African cricket field in the January 9, 2003 issue of *The Herald* Eastern Cape newspaper was a sight much like the first appearance of Jackie Robinson in baseball. Even though I had lived in South Africa until the end of the 1990s, cricket players had still been predominantly British whites. The soccer fields were rife with players of color, such as Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Sotho, Matabele, Pedi, Swana, and Venda. The rugby fields were comprised of Afrikaans, Colored, and British, and the cricket fields were littered with British, Indians, and Afrikaans.

The photograph in *The Herald* reflected a social maturation of nearly a decade of majority rule in once-apartheid South Africa. In the malls of Bloemfontein, the capital city of the Free State Province of South Africa, uniformed high school age girls of varying ethnics and skin hues could be seen socializing with each other. The identical uniforms the school girls were wearing indicated that they were being educated at the same school, a sure sign that “separate-hood” was being dismantled.

What also struck me about both the cricket players and the school girls was the apparent commonplaceness of such mixtures. No particular attention was given to the fact that the cricket players were both of a race that had traditionally not participated in such a sport. The attention was on the game itself being played, not the ethnic makeup of the players. The same was true with the

school girls: there was no observable significance – good or bad – given to the social mixture. The adult shop clerks or adult shoppers didn’t appear to notice the once-illegal activity that was now freely occurring in the shopping mall.

“...the South African society was living up to its self-proclaimed state of being a rainbow nation, free of segregation and its inherent social stigmas.”

The school girls themselves were interacting and their conversation topics were typical of those favored by most school girls:

fashion, boys, teachers, schoolwork, and music. The ethnic mixture appeared to hold no social significance among the girls themselves. It appeared that the South African society was living up to its self-proclaimed state of being a rainbow nation, free of racial segregation and its inherent social stigmas.

In the 1990s, I recall seeing on the back of the so-called “black-taxis” (non-white mini vans that were used as public transportation) and in the shops in Johannesburg, a banner with a profile of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with the words of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. This was the time period in which Nelson Mandela had recently been released from prison, the voting population (white-only) had passed a referendum supporting the switch to majority rule, and when the first-ever majority rule vote occurred in South Africa, resulting in the election of Nelson Mandela as president. Dr. King’s words, that described a dream in which a child could be judged on the content of his character and not by the color of his skin, were also a banner of hope for South Africans as they were collectively breaking the shackles of racial oppression.

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.... **South Africa Can Teach America (continued)**

Here in the United States, we still place significance on the eradication of racial barriers. Halle Berry, with her Best Actress Oscar, the Williams sisters' domination of the tennis courts, and Tiger Wood's golf phenomena are all notable to the American public not because of their talent alone, but because the people who achieved these feats are all in non-white bodies. And it is not just the media that places significance on racial mixture - ask any non-white or mixed couple about the looks they get in public. Or honestly ask yourself if you ever particularly notice racial mixture in social situations.

Yet in the nation that the United States sanctioned for its governmentally enforced policy of racial segregation – South Africa – it is taken in stride that people of color are participating in previously all-white sports. Or school girls of color wearing uniforms worn previously by all-white school girls, engaging in daily social activities with white school girls in a previously all-white suburban mall, with no social distinction given to such a mix. The only person who appeared to even note the significance was an American – me. In less than a decade, South Africa has shown signs of having removed not only the laws that held racial segregation in place, but the inherent social stigmas that plague such a structure and breed further social injustices. Perhaps South Africa has something to teach us Americans about achieving in reality, not just in lip service, the words of Dr. King's dream.



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Tina Kruger (above left) sports a suede coat given to her by her mother. Penny Lebyane (above right) relaxes with a cocktail. Tina and Penny exemplify the mixed racial climate of South Africa.

Malibongwe Maketa (Left) and Thobela Jemsana (Right) enjoy a game of Cricket at Union Cricket Ground.



Upcoming Enlightenment Series Speakers

Here are just a few of the many excellent guest speakers who will be giving presentations in our Enlightenment Series. See the back of this newsletter for more guest speakers and presentation dates.

Gary Cloutier (below) is a graduate of Brown University and a former staff member to Senator Claiborne (D-RI). He is presently a partner in the law firm of Wotman and Cloutier, which specializes in discrimination and civil rights lawsuits on behalf of plaintiffs in civil proceedings. He is also a member of the Vallejo City Council.



Emile Vinet Jr. (above, right) is a musical composer, performer, producer, and sound engineer. His specialty is Contemporary Jazz and Blues, and his latest albums include "About Time," "FlyAway," and "Back in the Day." He is currently signed to Tabitha Productions, Ltd.



Marcus "C" Lopez (left) has been teaching English at Solano Community College since 1979. He has written articles for newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. Mr. Lopez has had a variety of work experiences, including working in the fields as a farm worker.

Spring 2003 Programs and Speakers

February

- February 26 Richard Becker - War with Iraq 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. & 11 a.m. - 12 p.m.
February 27 Willard Wright - History of African American Medical Schools 11:00 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

March

- March 6 Debra McCarthy - Women and AIDS 9:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. - 12 p.m.
March 10 Marcus Lopez - From the Fields to the Classroom 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
March 12 Andy Porras - Cesar Chavez 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
March 13 Marcus Lopez - From the Fields to the Classroom 12:30 p.m. - 1:30 p.m.
March 18 Emile Vinet - The Blues 8:00 a.m. - 9:30 a.m. (Rm. 1239)
March 20 Joanne Schivley - Overcoming Obstacles 9:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
March 26 Emile Vinet - New Orleans Jazz 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. (Rm. 1239)
March 27 Paulette Perfumo - The Importance of Self Esteem 9:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

April

- April 3 Anne Bevilacqua - Violence and Religion 9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
April 4 Gary Cloutier - Sexual Orientation and Civil Rights 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
April 10 Gary Cloutier - Sexual Orientation and Civil Rights 12:30 p.m. - 1:45 p.m.
April 11 Steve Dawson - Cultural Impacts of Racial Profiling 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

**All presentations will be held in the boardroom (Room 626) unless otherwise stated.
For more information, call (707) 864-7000, Ext. 429.**

We greatly appreciate the support of SCC and the Associated Students.



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