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1. Introduction

The third [issue] is that culture always becomes a burning issue in times of perceived change and conflict: it is in moments of change, of course, that it becomes important to reflect on what is good and worth preserving in a society.'

The 1940's saw tremendous change in the state of the world starting with the Second World War and culminating with the formation of several new independent nation states such as Pakistan, India and Israel. The growing nationalist trend became more apparent over the following decades as African states gained their independence from their European colonizers. The ravaged state of the world recovering from War also saw the formation of an international mediating body in the form of the United Nations Organisation. The world was consequently repositioning itself in political and social terms to deal with the implementation of these changes.

Within South Africa during this period these international changes were manifested in actions such as the support for the Allied forces and the growth of the National Party. Nationalism was reflected by the actions of the ruling White minority government, which increasingly promoted legislation implementing segregation in order to protect its own interests. Within the Cape these changing trends saw transformations in the local political Black organisations, which became more radical and vociferous in their opposition to the increasing policies of segregation. There was a clear departure from the previous philosophy, which saw local Coloured political leaders placing their trust in the White rulers and using their influence to come to agreements that would benefit their constituencies. This change to an active rejection of the prevailing conditions has as its underlying basis the increasing restrictions being placed on Coloured people with regard to employment and economic opportunities and the consequent social advancement.

This paper seeks to examine how a cultural phenomenon such as the Coon Carnival seemed to persist in more or less the same form during this period of intense national upheaval. In addressing this issue, this paper will look at how the Coon Carnival was organised, contemporary perceptions of the participants, and whether the changing political arena had any impact on it. When looking the actual organisation, it is important to note the significance of the Carnival for its participants and to understand who those participants were and how they understood their identity. One needs to take into account that the Coon Carnival organization was not homogenous and there were distinct groupings within the event. It is an attempt to understand how the Coon Carnival operated in the period before the State's policies of segregation and repression were imposed on the communities that took part in the carnival. In this sense, this paper does not wish to enter the debate about whether or not this form of cultural expression represents the true customs of Coloured people or not. It will instead work from the premise that as the Coon Carnival's draws its numerous participants from the large majority of the Coloured working class population, that it is accepted as a form of culture at least by its participants and therefore a good example of popular culture

The paper will also explore the nature of the political changes that were taking place in the country and within the local oppositional organisations in the Western Cape in an attempt to understand how or whether the participants and organisers of the Coon carnival interacted with and were affected by it. As the Coon Carnival is an expression of Coloured culture, one needs to assess whether culture was being affected directly by the wider political and consequent economic changes in the country and whether within this context the participants still felt that it represented the symbols of their identity. This period was chosen in order to gain a sense of how an existing expression of culture would react to a changing environment that was not directly impacting on it but was affecting the everyday life of its participants. This period sees the start of the implementation of the National Party government's Apartheid policies, which lasts from the end of the 1940's to the early 1990's. It is the period that precedes the implementation of such policies that result in the breaking up the close knit communities from which the participants are drawn and sees the restricting of the movement of the Coon Carnival parade. The Coon

Carnival which was very closely linked to the inner city area of District Six suffered a great deal after this area is declared a White area in 1966 under the Group Areas Act and results in its inhabitants being forced to move to outlying areas more than 20km away such as Manenberg, Mitchell's Plain and Hanover Park. This disruption is further compounded when the local authorities place restrictions on the movement of the parade through the City centre in 1967. The impact of these measures not only on the Carnival but on the society in general have been documented by academic papers such as Lisa Baxter's *History, Identity and Meaning* (1996) and Shamiel Jeppie and Crane Soudien's (eds) *The Struggle for District Six — Past and Present* (1990).

If this paper is to make any conclusions about the perception of culture in a changing political setting, it needs to define what is understood by the term culture and how definitions of culture may vary depending on the standpoint from which it is viewed and who is doing the viewing. The following quotes that McGuigan uses illustrates this point:

The question as to who 'the people' are, where they/we will be made to stand, line up and be counted, the political direction in which they/we will be made to point: these are questions that cannot be resolved abstractly; they can only be answered politically

(Bennet 1986a:20)

To throw some light on discussions about the 'people' and the 'popular', one need only bear in mind that the 'People' and the 'Popular' ('popular art', 'popular religion', 'popular medicine', etc.) is first of all one of those things at stake in the struggle between intellectuals.

(Bourdieu 1990:150)²

The understanding is that culture would have a political dimension in terms of its origins as is the case of the Coons but also that it would be affected by the understanding and perceptions of those defining and examining the culture. The paper will attempt to touch on some of the wider issues and debates around the terms such as 'ordinary', 'popular' and 'culture' and some of the existing conceptual frameworks although it must be noted that it is the topic for a much more detailed study.

² McGuigan, 1: Cultural Populism, p9

An awareness of the manner in which culture is identified and understood is important in this discussion in order to establish the significance of the Coon carnival within the community that it existed. This would raise questions about ownership of the culture and who would determine the form that the expression of the culture would take.

A brief note to clarify or explain some issues pertinent to this paper is required before proceeding with the actual topic.

A question

To a large extent the information gathered in this paper about the Coon Carnival comes from two main sources: contemporary newspapers and oral information. As with all newspapers, it is accepted that it is written for a particular target group of readers, with specific interests and that they would therefore prioritise their articles to satisfy their customers. What must also be borne in mind is that newspapers generally reflect the views of the owners and so separate newspapers depending on these factors would report on the same issue differently. A further complicating factor was the fact that reporters, especially of the White owned press, when reporting on the Coon Carnival were dealing with a concept that was alien to their own culture and therefore events were represented in a misleading form or were plainly belittling in their descriptions. An example of this is the comment made in Cape Times of 4 January 1944 where right after describing the Coon as being 'as colourful as ever' the article goes on to note 'Some wore smart tailored blazers and grey flannels'. This is seen again in 3 January 1946 with the description of Coons that reads as follows:

Attired in smart sports coats and white trousers or in dapper lounge suits.

These were obviously members of the Malay choirs and not the Coons and the reporters probably simply classified them all as the same since they were groups of Coloured performers.

This paper deals with the Coon Carnival in the 1940's with the clear understanding that there were two separate carnival organisations operating at the same time and that these divisions increased as the decade progressed. This is not always made apparent by the newspapers and it was often dealt with as one event and including reports on the Malay

choirs. The significance of the Coon Carnival as a cultural event is also not captured by the media who pay very little attention to the actual songs and performances.

In terms of the oral sources, most of the informants interviewed were either very young or in their teens and early twenties at the time. They could, therefore, give only childhood recollections and impressions of the event but were able to contribute significantly based on the stories that they had heard from their parents. Those interviewees who were young men and women during the period under review have obviously aged since then and their recollections are coloured by events that have occurred subsequently and they clearly are beginning to suffer some memory loss. Their recollections were generally borne out by the newspaper reports although there were minor discrepancies. An example of this was the recollection by Ismail Dante that Afrikaans only became incorporated into the Coon Carnival after the Van Riebeeck Tricentenary celebrations which took place in 1952, yet newspaper articles in 1942 refer to the 'I D Du Plessis Silver Fez Trophy' ³ and in 1949 makes reference to 'traditional Afrikaans liedjies and moppies' ⁴

Terminology

This paper deals with an event that is associated primarily with a particular group in South Africa that had been racially classified as Coloured in terms of the segregatory rules that prevailed. This paper uses terms such as Coloured, White, African and Non-European in the sense that it had been used during the period under review. The Black refers to all persons other than Whites and is the same as the reference to Non-Europeans. It must be noted that while these racially defined categories may be offensive, it is a reflection of the reality of the past and is best used to explain the dynamics of that society. It must also be noted that while the democratic government and the Constitution has removed all traces of racial prejudice and respect for cultural and ethnic customs are encouraged, there are nonetheless very strong emotions associated with these identities. The understanding of an existing Coloured identity is still very strong especially among the working class.

³ The Cape Times 13 January 1942

⁴ The Cape Times 28 December 1949

Gender expressions

This paper generally refers to the male gender when dealing with the Coon Carnival as it was characterised by the predominance of males in terms of participation. Females were restricted to supportive roles such as members of the spectators or helping with the finalisation of costumes and the preparation of food. The use of the male gender type is thus simply a reflection of the past reality.

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2. The Coon Carnival in the 1940's

The festive season in Cape Town, as elsewhere in the Christian world, was characterised by the preparations for the religious holidays that form part of this period. An added aspect of the festivities for what was traditionally termed the 'big days'⁵ in the working class suburbs was the intense preparation for the Coon Carnival.

The Coon Carnival traditionally in Cape Town was the annual display of dancing and singing of the mainly working class Coloured population that took place in the inner city. The event usually took place on 2 January (Tweede Nuwe Jaar) with the final display and competition occurring on the first Saturday after that. Award winning troupes were 'invited to display their talents in the City Hall near the end of January to a predominantly White audience.'⁶

The celebration took the form of a parade through the main streets of District Six and Bo-Kaap and ended at a stadium where troupes competed with each other for various trophies. Participants in the Carnival generally lived in the neighbourhoods through which they paraded and troupe colours were displayed in the streets in the period prior to the Carnival: The troupes — groups of men, ranging in number from 150 to 300 — were dressed in brightly coloured garments usually made of satin and carried canes and later umbrellas. They characteristically painted their faces black with white markings. The troupe invariably was lead by a transvestite (Mollie) whose outfit was often far more flamboyant than the rest of the troupe. The Mollie while being accepted as part of the troupe would not be part of the formal activities in terms of songs and the marches but was allowed to perform on his own. Mollies were not allowed to practice with the rest of the troupe and after gaining the captain's permission to be the 'voorloper' (to parade in front) would simply show up on the day of the Carnival having provided his own costume and having prepared entirely on his own.⁵

⁵ Interview with Ms Angelina Clark

⁶ Interview with Dante Brothers, confirmed by the Cape Times 29 December 1948

⁷ Interview with Angelina Clarke
Interview with Mr Eddie Matthews

Preparations for the carnival generally began in August when the announcement would be made about the formation of troupes and participants would decide which troupe they wanted belong to. Each troupe captain chose the colours and design that his troupe would be wearing on the days of the carnival during this early period and engaged the services of a tailor. These decisions about membership and tailors had to be made early as each outfit was made to fit and tailors' services would be in great demand. [This practice has changed in the present day as orders for uniforms are made on standard sizes and troupe members generally get an outfit that is approximately their size. One assumes that this change has occurred as a cost saving measure, as uniforms can now be mass-produced more cheaply. A further explanation may be the fact that after the inner city area of District Six was demolished, participants found themselves living in areas that were great distances away from the tailor and the troupe captain which would make co-ordinating the fitting of uniforms difficult, especially as most working class members would not have access to their own form of transport.] The final product would be kept a secret until the day of the parade when troupe members were given their outfits. This intense secrecy was done with the consent of all the members and the co-operation of the tailor who would blindfold the participants when fitting the garments in order to maintain the mystery.⁹ Tailors generally were part of the community and ran small home-based industries that were supported by their families.

This secrecy extended to the performances of the troupes as well with song, dance and marching routines practiced in private spaces with the undertaking from participants not to divulge the repertoire to other troupes. Captains would strive to get the most talented members of the community as part of their troupe and would actively scout for new talent. This form of scouting was seen as a means for developing and encouraging the talent of the youth and as a measure designed to keep them off the street.¹⁰

The songs and routines performed were generally influenced by the prevailing trends within other forms of popular culture such as popular songs and movies. While the actual form of the carnival would not change significantly, troupes would imitate current trends

⁹ Interview with Dante Brothers and confirmed by Mr Bathe.

¹⁰ Interview with the Dante Brothers

being displayed by international artists. These imitations extended to the performance of the Moffie and interviewees spoke about a Carmen Miranda, Al Jolson or Paul Robeson as if they were referring to the actual performer.

We had Al Jolson in our troupe, do you know Al Jolson and Paul Robeson.

Yes the real ones.¹¹

The captain who headed the troupe was responsible for co-ordinating the activities of the troupe. This involved arranging the singing and dancing practices, providing a venue for the troupe to meet and disseminating the relevant information to all participants. This process was relatively unproblematic as troupe members usually lived in the same area thus eliminating the need for transport and complicated communication methods. Word of mouth commonly was the form of communication to indicate the start of the preparations for the carnival. A common phrase used by interviewees was '*You would just hear ... and then you knew that it was that time*' The captain was also responsible for recording the names of his troupe members maintaining discipline, collecting money for the outfits and monitoring the production of the uniforms. The troupe members paid for their uniforms on a 'set aside' basis, which essentially meant that they paid it off to the Captain over a period of a few months. This method of payment meant that many tailors would be ensured of an income for several consecutive months of the year.

Troupe members usually lived in the same area and joined the troupe that their friends belonged to or quite often would join rival troupes so as to compete with each other.¹²

Rank and file troupe membership tended to change from year to year with movements of members between troupes, natural attrition and in the 1940's specifically the fact that large numbers of young Coloured men enlisted in the Cape Corps.

The performances and activities of the troupes represented an important event in the calendar of the inner city working class Coloured areas of Bo-Kaap, District Six, Woodstock and Salt River. Members of these communities invariably lived in poverty with very few of the luxuries and conveniences that were available to members of the

ic''

¹¹ Interview with Mr Eddie Matthews

¹² Interview with Mr Eddie Matthews, confirmed by the Dante brothers and Mr Paulse

upper classes of the Coloured community. The preparation for the carnival and the excitement that it generated served as a rite that firmly signalled the end of one year and the start of another.

'n Mens moet iets het om te wys dis Nuwe Jaar, anders hoe gaan mense wiet. Daar gaan niks pleasure wies nie, niks om uit te kyk voor nie.

(A person needs something to indicate its New Year, otherwise how will people know. There will be no pleasure, nothing to look forward to.)¹³

One thing that ~~excites~~ ~~through~~ the years, is the spirit of the New Years, the

This may have been the unintended outcome of the carnival and does not necessarily explain the historical basis of the event. This paper will explore some of these explanations for the existence of the carnival. The community from which the participants came generally prepared for the day of the carnival by packing picnic baskets and camping along the route the night before. The excitement would build up for a long period before the actual event with preparation of food and 'booking' of places on the route.¹⁵ The women would wear rosettes of the troupes that they supported and food was shared with the troupes as they passed.

Coon performances in the 1940's

The two Boards in existence at the start of the 1940's - the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board and the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board - operated independently of each other with regard to competitions and venues. They took part in the street parade together after which they parted ways to go to their respective venues.

The Boards were made up essentially of the organiser or Director and the Troupe Captains. Many tailors were Captains of troupes or they owned troupes without getting involved in the running of it. This involvement was quite often based not only on the fact that tailors were an integral part of the community but also on the personal financial interest that the tailors had in the event. The Director who quite often had at least one

¹³ Interview with Dante Brothers, quote by Ismail Dante

Interview with Mrs Matthews

¹⁵ Interview with Ms Angelina Clark and confirmed by Mr Eddie Matthews and Mr Tahier Levy

troupe of his own, usually kept the other Captains informed of their financial responsibility and handled the bulk of the work preparing for the Carnival in terms of the overall logistics and finances. He was also responsible for co-ordinating the logistical arrangements and negotiating with the relevant authorities with regard to venues and routes.

The Coloured Carnival Coronation Board was established in 1937¹⁶ and managed by Mr Freddie Robertson. This Board performed at Green Point Track and contributed to the Governor General's National War Fund. The Coloured Carnival Coronation Board was very closely linked to the Municipality and from 1940 was assisted by Mr Lotz, manager of the Seaside and Bathing Attractions Department in organising the carnival.

The Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board was formed in 1939 as a result of the amalgamation of the Western Province Carnival Board (established in 1922) and the Jubilee (Coloured) Carnival Board (established in 1935). These two original boards were similar except for the Jubilee Carnival Board's contribution to various local charities such as St Monica's Home, St Francis Home and the Athlone Blind School. This Board usually displayed its performances at the Rosebank stadium.

In 1942, the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board, which was organised by Mr Freddie Robertson with the assistance of Mr Lotz, of the Municipality, worked together with the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board headed by Mr Jimmy Allen and the Cape Malay Board to stage a combined performance. As the numbers of troupes were too great to be accommodated at one venue, it was decided to use two venues — Hartleyvale and Green Point Track - for the competition and to let the winners of each venue compete with each other. Dr I D Du Plessis and the Municipality facilitated this combined performance. Dr Du Plessis' stated aims for attempting to co-ordinate the displays of the Malay Board and the Coons was that it would form an attractive item during the holiday season and that it would help individual members of the troupes." In this year all the

¹⁶ The Cape Times, 29 December 1945
Minutes of the Amenities Committee of the Cape Town City Council 1941

financial arrangements were under the control of the City Council and participating troupes received equal amounts after the War Fund contribution and expenses were

An attempt to arrange such a combined performance had been unsuccessful the previous year as there was a dispute about the charities to which the proceeds would be disbursed. As a result 1941 saw a joint presentation by the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board and the Cape Malay Board facilitated by Dr I D Du Plessis:¹⁹ The Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board felt that it did not wish to contribute to the War Fund and that the money should instead go to local charities.²⁰

In 1943 after the combined performance in 1942, however, the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board once again performed separately this time at the Mowbray City and Suburban Football ground indicating that the differences that existed between the two boards prior to the combined performance had not been overcome. It would appear from the manner in which the carnival of the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board was promoted in 1943 that the differences had its basis in political and social ideology and not in cultural identity.²¹

After the 1942 combined presentation, the two boards continued to perform separately and at different venues. Dr Du Plessis' influence continued at the performances of the Coon carnival by encouraging them to use of Afrikaans and patriotic songs. In this regard, he did not distinguish between the Boards and promoted the use of Afrikaans at both venues.

By the end of the decade the divisions within the Coon movement had resulted in further Boards being established. Besides the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board and the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board, the Western Province Non-European Sporting

¹⁵ The Cape Standard 30 December 1941

¹⁹ The Cape Times 3 January 1941

²⁰ The Cape Standard 24 December 1940

²¹ The Cape Standard 15 December 1942

Union had been formed in 1948²² and by 1950 the Cape of Good Hope Carnival Board²³ and the Cape Peninsula Coon Carnival Board" had been established.

The effect of the Second World War on the Coons saw a reduction in the numbers of participants and they lost many of the younger members of the community to the War effort. The Coon Carnival was used as sites to recruit young Coloured men to join the War.

*A recruiting rally was held in conjunction with the carnival and on both days the band of the Indian and Malay Corps was in attendance with a detachment of picked Coloured soldiers. Major C Stubbs, who is connected with Coloured recruiting, took the salute during the march past of the band.*²⁵

The post war period was characterised by escalating costs and scarcity of materials resulting in restrictions in the number of colours used²⁶. A direct influence of the War on the parade of the Coons was the increasing use of the colours of the Allied forces and the display of the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack

The war period also saw the end of the 'Privates'. These were troupes that took part in the street parades but did not get involved in the competitions.²⁷ They often wore a range of various styles such as sailors, Spanish noblemen, eighteenth century Englishmen, dashing desert sheikhs and American traditional warriors. The assumption is made that it became too expensive for these troupes to continue performing and the only group that survived until the 1970's was the American traditional warriors or 'Achas' as the community knew them.

²² The Cape Times 29 December 1948

²³ The Sun 29 December 1950

²⁴ The Cape Times 19 December 1950

²⁵ The Sun 9 Jan 1942

²⁶ The Cape Times, 28 December 1948

²⁷ Interview with Mr Paulse, Confirmed by the Dante Brothers

Exploring differences within the same culture.

Dr Du Plessis pointed out, however, that there was so much friction amongst the Coons that it would not be easy to form a combined Board 'but that it ought to be easier to get them to collaborate with the Malay Board.'²⁸

The quote above taken from the minutes of the City Council Committee meeting where Dr I D Du Plessis appealed to the Council to assist with the organisation of a combined performance of the two Coon Boards. It clearly indicates that the organisers of the Coon Carnival was not a homogenous group and that there was friction between the Boards. In order to attempt to understand some of this friction one has to begin to unravel who the organisers were and how they differed with regard to the manner in which they managed their Boards.

Mr J W G Allen, the director and secretary, is quoted as saying that the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board 'aims at the betterment of the Coons, to improve its organisation and to keep it under Coloured contra" This reference to 'Coloured' people and Coloured pride is made several times by Mr Allen and seems to be indicative of the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board's values. Commenting on the combined performance orchestrated by the City Council and Dr I D Du Plessis, Mr Allen said 'that controlling interests should remain in Coloured hands as the Carnival is Coloured". The 1943 Carnival of the Western Cape Jubilee Carnival Board is advertised in the following way:

A Coloured Carnival for Coloured folk on property owned by Coloured people.

Our New Year resolution is Unity³¹

²⁸ Minutes of Amenities Committee of the Cape Town City Council

²⁹ The Cape Standard, 12 December 1939

^{1°} The Cape Standard, 17 December 1940

³¹ The Sun, 24 December 1942

It would appear from the slight differences noted above that the two Boards were headed by men who clearly had very different political positions. While both Boards invited members of the Council to be either judges or guests of honour, the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board of Freddie Robertson had the active support of the Council in terms of the organisation of its activities.

The reference to 'Unity' in the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board's advertisement of the Carnival for 1943 is significant as it can be seen as a reflection of the ideology of the emerging political organisations. Of equal significance is the fact that Ms Z Gool opened proceedings at the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board in 1943 and complimented the organisers on their slogan and urged the participants to develop race pride."

The difference between the two boards is further illustrated by the fact that the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board had separate seating for 'Europeans' and differences in the entry fee and locations where tickets could be bought while the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board had one admission price and no segregation³³

The existence of separate boards in the 1940's that seems to continue the present day begins to raise questions about the nature of these differences and what the basis for it is. The assumption should not be made that differences in the past are continued to be reflected in the present, as a study of the history of the Boards in the interim period would reveal a far more accurate portrayal. It is, however, interesting to note that there remain differences between the boards despite the fact that as in the 1940's these differences were not reflected in the expression of the culture. The question that could be raised is around whether the existence of two boards at the start of the 1940's was simply a matter of catering for different areas although it must be noted that they both lived in District Six in the 1940's and therefore catered to the participants in the same neighbourhood. Was it a matter of two competing strong personalities in the persons of Jimmy Allen and Freddy Robertson? It would appear that Jimmy Allen and Freddy Robertson were originally part

The Cape Standard, 5 Jan 1943

³³ The Cape Standard, 9 January 1945

of the same board until they split.³⁴ Despite the split, it did not appear as if the split was acrimonious and that they remained friends.³⁵ If it were ideological differences, then this was not overtly so and may have been reflected only in the charities that they donated to, the political affiliation of the Councillors that they invited to the performances and the extent of involvement of the authorities. If these differences were the underlying reasons for the existence of separate boards, it would be safe to say that it would be a reflection of the organisers' ideology and not that of the ordinary troupe members who had no unwavering allegiance to any particular board or troupe.

Conservative Nature of the Coon Carnival

The involvement of City Council members in one form or the other needs to be noted as one of the indicators of the essentially conservative nature of the Coon carnival. City Council members including the Mayor and Mayoress either opened the event, acted as adjudicators or handed out trophies.

Shamiel Jeppie's refers to Bakhtin's description of festival in his interpretation of the Coon Carnival as

*The occupation of public space by the dispossessed , the control of movement in this commercially hallowed space by the crowd, the shift of focus from the powerful onto the powerless ... the near absence and powerlessness of the police..*³⁶

While the Carnival may symbolically have indicated an inversion of power relations and control of space, this is the extent of the inversion. Jeppie further notes,

But this was possible precisely because control and domination were central, though not unquestioned elements in the experience of the Cape Town working class³⁷

The inversion with regard to movement and space that appears spontaneous and anarchist is in fact very carefully controlled and there is no real questioning of the power relations that existed. On the contrary the power relations and levels of hierarchy is respected to

³⁴ Interview with Mr Eddie Matthews

³⁵ Interview with Mr Fred Robertson

³⁶ Jeppie S, Aspects of popular culture, p42

³⁷ ibid

the extent that the organisers were themselves in power. One sees this in the involvement of the Municipality in the organisation of the performance of the Coloured Carnival Coronation Board. This aspect would also ensure that strict rules are adhered to with regard to the route that the parade follows, the behaviour of the troupes and the exact timing of the event. Troupe members were not allowed to badger members of the public in an effort to solicit donations. They would be fined or dismissed from their troupe if they were found guilty of contravening the conventions with regard to behaviour³⁸

The extent to which the Carnival operated within the confines of the existing power structures and with the sanction of the authorities is evident by the fact that the Council was able to place various restrictions on the movement of the Coons³⁹ until the prohibition of the street parade in 1967 after the traffic authorities felt unable to cope.⁴⁰ The power and control of the movement and space evidently still resided in the hands of the authorities that were able to dictate the terms under which carnival could take place.

The conservative nature of the Coon Carnival is not only illustrated by their compliance with the restrictions placed on them by the State but also within the organisation itself. Interviewees confirm that both Mr Robertson and Mr Allen were very strict about the manner with regard to behaviour and dress in which troupes presented themselves, the punctuality and their behaviour when the final results were announced and trophies handed out.

Troupe participants were not allowed to wear their uniforms before the day of the parade and when they did show up to collect the final accessories on tweede nuwe jaar, they had to be properly attired with a white shirt and white takkies.⁴¹ If they contravened these rules, they would not be allowed to participate. They were expected to congratulate the winning team without any display of resentment. On the morning of the parade, the directors of the Boards would go around to each klopskamer' (literally club room) to warn the troupes about their behaviour and remind them to be punctual.

³⁸ Interview with Mr Paulse and confirmed by Mr Matthews

³⁹ Martin, *Di Coon Carnival*, pp125-126

Interview with Dante Brothers

⁴¹ Interview with Mr Paulse and with the Dante Brothers

While agreeing with Jeppie about the outward show of disorder in terms of dress and gestures, one needs to examine these more closely. The uniform worn by the Coons are generally in the design of a suit, which consists of a tailored jacket and a pair of trousers. This form of dress is usually considered reasonably conservative and while the 'inversion' of this form is the creation of suits in garish colours, there was definite sense of order when one considers the need for perfect fitting suits and uniform designs. In terms of the gestures, they were often described as 'prancing', 'gyrating', 'cavorting' or 'frolicking' which sends a clear message of disorder to anyone viewing them yet at the same time they were organised similarly to the military with precision in terms of uniform dress which was noted above, they marched through the streets as part of their parade and even had a trophy for the Best March Past. The head of each troupe was called the 'captain'. At the rallies when the military participated in order to recruit young Coloured men, it was not out of place that their soldiers also marched.

Perceptions and class composition

*"This is not wholly typical of the Cape Coloured people", he said. "In some way it is just a safety valve, for there are many among us with noble aspirations and a real desire to better ourselves"*⁴²

There are people in my neighbourhood who are perfectly respectable during the year but when it gets to the end of the year they are pan of the Coons I¹³

From the two quotes above which were made 51 years apart, it seems evident that perceptions of the Coons had not changed much. When looking at perceptions, one has to base those perceptions within a context. Clearly from both statements, it would appear that the perceptions are that participants of the Coon Carnival are of a lower class than the rest of society and somewhat uncivilized. While clearly a Coloured working class

⁴⁴ The Cape Times 4 January 1950

⁴³ This is a comment by my babysitter, Zena Norling, who has lived in the working class suburb of Mitchell's Plain all 23 years of her life in response to my explanation of the topic of my mini-thesis.

expression of culture, other members of the Coloured community as is hinted at in the first quote above reviled it. This type of sentiment expressed to the Cape times journalist by 'a well dressed Coloured man' was typical of not only the way in which middle class Coloureds and Whites perceived the Coons but was perpetuated by the media who described the actions of the Coons as 'gyrating movements' or 'capering antics'. In the same article as the report on the Coon Carnival from which the quote above is taken, is a report on the Coloured picnics at Kalk Bay, which states:

A Kalk Bay harbour official said yesterday that there had been no accidents or unpleasant incidents at the weekend. The crowds were very well behaved he said.

The combining of the two reports and the negative manner in which Coloured leisure activities were reported on is an indication of the low esteem and scorn in which they were held. The perceptions of many middle class Coloureds were reflected in the media in the form that the articles are written and often more directly by the letters to the editor. A report in the Cape Standard in January 1946 refers to a number of troupes who wore natty suits and did not prance about and contemplates the following:

If the number of Coons in mufti keep gaining ground, we will soon find the whole character of the Coon carnivals changing. We will still have the feathered 'Redskins' though.

While the reporter clearly has confused Malay choirs with Coons, the value of the Coon carnival seems to be in its ability to amuse and to behave in a loud and garish manner. Of the media reports of that period, no attention is given to the content of the event in terms of the songs and performances.

Another example of how the middle class Coloured community viewed the Coons can be noted from an interview with R O Dudley who refers them as being part of 'an underclass working people' and 'coons were drawn from a certain class'.⁴⁴ There was the feeling that there was a conscious collusion between the government and the Coons where

⁴⁴ R O Dudley WCOHP: The Coon Carnival

the coons were involved as being sort of representative of the so-called Coloured culture that they were trying to generate in order to underline this sort of stereotyping.⁴⁵

In the interview Dudley concedes that he has no real contact with the Coon culture having been raised in a middle class home and suburb. He also reluctantly agrees that they hold some cultural value and would serve as a tool of expression for working class woes. An example that he remembers in this regard is the following:

Incidentally that's another aspect of this thing that does excite one's interest in this without having to accept it, but I can remember 20 years later, 1972, that was a beginning of a phase of economic depression that was really beginning to hit people with lots of unemployment crises arising. I think a lot of it is attributed to the fact that we were on the eve of the Arab-Israeli war and 1972 the prices of oil and so on shot up and the prices of commodities had gone up, and it was very amusing to listen to the songs that they were singing in different parts of the Western cape here, because the refrain this time was principally 'Even the bad times are good'

The type of distancing from the Coons that it portrayed by Mr Dudley's language can be seen in other instances where criticism is levelled at the Coons. A contemporary example of this is the Coloured student from Wynberg who wrote a full page letter to The Cape Standard criticising the Coons entitled 'I don't like them and I give my reasons'.⁴⁶ He refers to them as degrading and primitive and of significance is the fact that he raises the issue of there being no similar event for Europeans and how this type of behaviour will interfere with gaining equality with them. From these types of comments it becomes apparent that the middle class Coloured aspired to the values of Whites and did not recognize the value of the Coon Carnival as being part of their culture.

⁴⁵ R O Dudley WCOHP: The Coon Carnival

⁴⁶ The Cape Standard 9 January 1940

Lisa Baxter in reviewing the history and meaning of the Carnival in the period 1960 to 1980 raises the question about which community the carnival belonged to and what the prevailing perceptions of it were. She notes:

Indeed, the Coon Carnival of the Sixties and Seventies like its forerunners and those that would follow, was the expression of a "community" but this collective was not homogenous, static or fixed. Rather, it was a community comprised of a diverse host of identities, social positions and roles, who came together annually for a variety of conflicting reasons. The salient point of commonality justifying their definition as a group derived from an essential shared sense of space. Festivities were rooted in an active and contemporary awareness of a mythologized, precise, urban territory — central Cape Town and District Six.⁴⁷

Many middle-class members of the community objected to the celebration, not because it implicitly affirmed the concept of cultural uniqueness, but because the "Coloured Culture" it represented was not their own; working-class and disreputable, its drunken licentiousness offended their bourgeoisie sensibilities. The Coon Carnival displayed to White society a base caricature of what it meant to be "Coloured": a stereotype with which the middle-class felt not affinity but contempt. Indeed, in a context where many middle-class Coloureds were trying to protect their diminishing rights on the grounds of their cultural affinity with Whites, the event stood as a handicap.⁴⁸

Baxter's assessment of the apprehension that middle class Coloureds felt with regard to the Coon Carnival could equally be applied to the 1940's and this is supported by the ideals of the contemporary political organisations.

Her analysis that the community to which the Carnival belonged was defined by a shared sense of space has not been substantiated by history as the Carnival continued to exist despite the loss of this urban territory. It may be more accurate to state that the common

⁴⁷ Baxter, L: History, Identity and Meaning, p178

⁴⁸ Baxter, L: History, Identity and Meaning, p182

experience of participants in terms of their working class background and their poverty would unite them. In addition, this common experience is further consolidated by their shared ethnic descendency. This ethnicity was acknowledged by the middle class members of the Coloured community who exploited it in order to gain advantages over other Non-Europeans. The fact that these features came together in the same geographical area may be fortuitous, but also possibly served as an important factor that ensured the continued existence of the Carnival in the initial stages and the growth of the sense of community.

An explanation of the levels of poverty in the inner city area may be required in order for there to be a clear understanding of the material conditions of the working class sector of the Coloured community: District Six was an overcrowded, poor, slum area exploited by ruthless landlords.

District Six was crumbling and don't get me wrong it sounds terrible to say, but if they didn't tear it down, it would have started crumbling. The government should have fixed it up instead,

Often families of seven occupied a single room and households depended on the combined income of both parents and usually offspring as well. Conditions not only affected the health of the inhabitants but also their social and psychological well-being. Alcohol consumption played an important role in alleviating the pain of reality while at the same time allowing those in control to maintain their positions of power and continue to subjugate the poor.

For this stratum, where life presented one long continual battle for survival, circumstances must have seemed to have had a dead-weight of permanence, entirely beyond their power to control. There was tremendous job insecurity in a labour market where job turnover was still very high, and a short illness or period of arrest for committing one of the many technical offences could land one in prison, could lead to loss of job and income."

⁴⁹ Interview with Mr Paulse

so Pinnock D: From Argie Boys to Skolly Gangsters in Studies in the History of Cape Town Vol.3, p150

The cost of living increased steadily during the 1920's and 1930's while wages remained static. Children's schooling were often cut when they had to join their parents in the job market in order to survive.

Afrikaans and the role of Dr ID Du Plessis

Afrikaans songs increasingly became part of the repertoire in the 1940's with the influence of Dr I D Du Plessis. Dr Du Plessis was appointed as Commissioner for Coloured Affairs in 1951 and was very closely linked to the Coloured people in the 1930's and 1940's. Shamiel Jeppie explores Dr Du Plessis' involvement in Coloured culture and his role in attempting to formulate a distinct Malay cultural identity in his paper entitled, *Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects* (1987). Jeppie summarizes the perspective from which Du Plessis operated in the following manner:

He emerged at the moment of mobilization of Afrikaans-speakers and he was both mobilized and acted in a mobilizing capacity. Du Plessis answered the "calling" of nationalism in the early years as a journalist, poet and teacher. At the same time he generated a cultural niche for Afrikaner poets and writers, yet he was attached to expressions of liberalism. Du Plessis' social and intellectual role was deployed through the categories of Romanticism and Social Darwinism stressing the "individual" and his release from social constraints, the obsession with the exotic (and sometimes erotic) and the "protection" of "weaker peoples" and their gradual evolution."

Du Plessis's involvement in Coloured culture focussed mainly on the Malay Choirs and he was responsible for the establishment the Cape Malay Choir Board in 1939, which would regulate the activities of the choirs.⁵² In this regard and in his involvement with the Coon Carnival he strongly advocated the use traditional Afrikaans songs. While his involvement centred mainly on the Malay Choirs, he actively attempted to influence and organise the Coons in a similar manner to the extent that he approached the City Council

Jeppie, S: *Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects*, p21

⁵² Jeppie, S: *Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects*, p9

for assistance in this regard.⁵³ He also sponsored a trophy for the best patriotic Afrikaans song and remained actively involved despite being unable to unite the Coon Carnival Boards by either judging events or being a guest of honour.

This promotion of Afrikaans and patriotic songs was endorsed by the White-owned media as well that reported on the event. An article in the Cape Times of 29 December 1948 by George Aschmann who wrote as a form of social commentary praises the work done by I D Du Plessis and suggests that more attention be given to 'Cape based songs' and expresses the hope that these talents be displayed at the Tricentenary celebrations. In general the media reported positively about the increase usage of Afrikaans songs.

University of Cape Town

⁵³ Council Minutes 1/4/5/5/1/1

3. The changing political setting

Besides, Long explained, Coloureds could not be given equality with whites, because they were different, liable 'to be carried away by gales of emotionalism' at election time: The Coloured are naturally gregarious, excitable and noisy. They are fond of loud, rhythmic music, bright colours, talking at the top of the voice. They usually have none of the white instinct for keeping oneself to oneself

This quote from B K Long, ex-editor of the Cape Times and United Party member of Parliament raises a typical White stereotyping of the Coloured people and is used in the context of the promotion of continued segregation.

In order to understand the context that the Coon carnival operated in, one needs to examine the prevailing tensions that existed at the time within the Coloured politics that dominated the Western Cape

The first three decades of Coloured politics was dominated by the African People's Organisation (APO), which was established in 1902⁵⁵ and succeeded in getting Dr Abdurahman as the first Non-European elected to the Cape Town City Council in 1904⁵⁶. Up until this period, the Coloured group was not recognised as a separate identity and they were absorbed into a wider strata of 'Non-Europeans'.⁵⁷ Many of the Coloured elites that formed part the APO did not see themselves as separate from the White and strove for equal status. They aspired to the ideals of White culture and social positions as they did not see much difference in the manner in which the two groups were socially organised. In the early period of the century possibly up until the early 1970's, there were many instances of Coloured people who were fairskinned enough and thus 'passed for White'⁵⁸. This was advantageous as it gave them the advantages that the White population enjoyed and rescued them from the discrimination suffered by the Coloured

⁵⁴ Lewis, G Between the Wire and the Wall, p210

⁵⁵ Goldin, I Making Race, p29

⁵⁶ Lewis, G Between the Wire and the Wall, p27

⁵⁴ Goldin, I, Making Race, p26

⁵⁵ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher' s League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p66

community. The similarity in culture and social organisation made this transition possible.

The APO was primarily concerned with the promotion of the Coloured community and identity as distinct from that of Africans in the face of increasing prejudice against Non-Europeans and initially concentrated mainly on issues concerning the franchise and improvement of education which they saw as a means to improving the plight of the Coloured people. Despite its name and its initial rhetoric with regard to its support for the formation of the South African Native National Congress (later called the African National Congress) and its campaign against the 1913 Land Act, the APO was primarily concerned with the preservation of the Coloured identity and privileged position in relation to other Non-Europeans. This is illustrated by a remark made by Dr Abdurahman at the 1910 APO conference.

*as we [meet] as an organisation of the Coloured people of South Africa...
it is my duty as president of the APO to deal with the rights and duties of
the Coloured people of South Africa as distinguished from the native
races.*⁵⁹

Dr Abdurahman used his influence and position to argue to the protection Coloured rights and the extension of liberties so that it would be on par with the Whites. This need for integration was exploited by Hertzog 1924 who promised Coloureds the prospect of parity with Whites and a position of privilege relative to Africans for their support in the following election. After their election victory, these promises were abandoned and the process of segregation continued to be consolidated.

The main supporters of the APO were the Coloured middle class but the organisation was having difficulty maintaining their support by the mid 1930's as the organisation had been discredited. This reduction in their reputation was as a result of the inability of the APO to stem the increasing implementation of racially segregating policies of the government and the erosion of the franchise (The government had passed the Women's

⁵⁹ Goldin, I: Making Race, p33

⁶⁰ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p54

Enfranchisement Act in 1930⁶¹, thereby reducing the Coloured voting power by half) which resulted in a consequent weakening of the position of the Coloured people.

The decline of the APO and the increasing segregation of Non-Europeans including Coloureds saw the rise of the radical leaders who were descendent from the upper classes of the Coloured community in the Western Cape and invariably were doctors or teachers. Prominent among this group was Cissie Gool, daughter of Dr Abdurahman, her brother-in-law, Dr Goolam Gool, his wife, Hawa Ahmed, Ben Kies, a teacher, Jimmy La Guma and John Gomas.⁶² This group of individuals was responsible for the establishment of the non-racial, non-sectarian organisation called the National Liberation League(NLL) in 1935. The goal of the NLL was to seek parity with the Whites in the social, economic and political sphere. Adhikari attributes the radical character of the NLL members to the fact that unlike their predecessors they grew to maturity in an age when the prospect of assimilation was very slim and there was increasing marginalisation in terms of race.⁶³ In terms of understanding the social oppression being experienced and in order to provide a feasible framework to deal with the increasing segregation, socialism provided a workable solution for the young radicals who began to institute strategies of mass protests, marches and boycotts.

While the NLL was clearly radical in its expression, it was dominated by members of the Coloured middle class and thus had very little impact on the lives of working class Coloureds or Africans. In an attempt to broaden its non-racial opposition support base, they formed the Non-European Unity Front in 1938, which included organisations such as the ANC(WC) and the CPSA. One of the first campaigns that propelled these organisations to prominence was its opposition campaign to the ordinance published in July 1938, which would allow local authorities to impose segregatory measures on residential areas, transport facilities and local amenities.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p56

⁶² Lewis, G Between the Wire and the Wall, p180

⁶³ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p67

⁶⁴ Lewis, G Between the Wire and the Wall, p189

The success of this campaign was followed only in 1943 by the formation of the Anti-CAD organisation which opposed the government's attempts to introduce a Coloured Affairs Department similar to the Natives' Representative Council established in 1936⁶⁵ The Anti-CAD movement was a federal structure with representatives from many organisations and was dominated by the new radical faction within the Teachers' League of South Africa.

In the period between the anti-segregatory policy campaign and the formation of the Anti-CAD movement, the NLL resembled the APO in its structure and ideology thus not really incorporating the needs of the Coloured working class and remaining an organisation with middle class aspirations.

Despite these campaigns, the Coloured Advisory Council was launched in 1943 with the aim of improving the position of Coloureds. It made recommendations about 'better nutrition, health services and housing, improved educational facilities, wider scope for employment and improved wages and economic conditions'.⁶⁶ While it managed to gain some concessions from government, it was not able to make progress with regard to its calls for compulsory education, increased economic opportunities and an extension of the franchise. Members of the Coloured Advisory Council were drawn mainly from the leadership of the defunct APO and from the conservative sector of the TLSA and were regarded as 'Quislings' or 'collaborators' by the Anti-CAD organisation⁶⁷. When the National Party announced its Apartheid policies in 1948, however, the members of the Coloured Advisory Council joined the Coloured oppositional groups in voicing their rejection of the proposed elected Coloured Representative Council.

The Anti-CAD movement saw the Coloured Advisory Council as encouraging the government's segregatory policies and felt that it needed to form a wider political grouping that would fight segregation. To achieve this aim, they joined the MI African Convention to form the federal Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) in 1943, which

⁶⁵ Lewis, G *Between the Wire and the Wall*, p209

⁶⁶ Lewis, G *Between the Wire and the Wall*, p212

⁶⁷ Alexander, N: *Non-collaboration in the Western Cape, 1943 — 1963 in The Angry Divide* by James, W & Simons, M, pp183-184

adopted a 'Declaration of Unity', which set out a ten-point programme. This programme sets out the list of non-compromise policies that the NEUM committed itself to achieving. A similar organisation of radicals within the ANC was formed in 1943 — the Youth League. This period also saw the Teachers' League of South Africa being transformed by the young radicals who at the annual conference in Kimberly gained all the Executive positions thereby ousting members of the TLSA who had supported the formation of the Coloured Advisory Council.⁶⁸

As becomes apparent, within Coloured politics, 1943 is a turning point with regard to the formation and restructuring of political organisations in the Western Cape. The period to the end of the decade sees these organisations consolidating its base and attempting to forge alliances with each other in an attempt to broaden their support and present a united opposition. These measures did not succeed as the dominant Coloured organisation in the Western Cape, the NEUM refused to support the campaigns of other organisations that it regarded as sectarian and this general attitude served as a stumbling bloc to establishing a common platform.

By the time that the National Party announced its intentions of introducing its Apartheid policies in 1948, the Coloured parties were united only in with regard to their opposition to the segregationist policies but was not prepared for the type of onslaught that Apartheid would unleash.

Coloured Preference Policy

The Coloured Preference Policy within the Western Cape saw Coloured being given special privileges compared to Africans with the understanding that they would support the White led government. This process started early in the century with the growing purpose of firmly establishing distinct race groups with the aim of 'divide and rule'.⁶⁹ This policy served the purposes of several consecutive minority-led governments in order to suppress a far greater disenfranchised majority. The development of this policy took place at the same time as the Coloured identity was being forged as distinct from other

⁶⁸ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p71

⁶⁹ Goldin I, Making Race, p34

Non-Europeans and was thus used both by the government and the dominant Coloured political organisation at the time — the APO. Coloureds were exempted from the harsh effects of influx control and residential segregation that was imposed on Africans in the 1920's. the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 relaxed the movement of Coloureds while further restricting the influx of Africans to the Western Cape. ⁷⁰

An example of Dr Abdurahman and the APO's influence can be seen in the incident in 1921 when being threatened by the increasing employment of cheap African labour, Dr Abdurahman petitioned the Railways and Harbours Board. This resulted in 800 African dockers being dismissed and their positions being given to Coloured workers.

With the election of the Hertzog government in 1924 with the support of the Coloured vote, the Coloured Preference Policy was further enhanced by the introduction of four bills that would extend the Coloured vote while simultaneously further oppressing Africans. Although Parliament refused to extend the Coloured vote, it continued to support policies of Coloured preference and place restrictions on Africans.

In spite of the Coloured Preference Policy, the weakening of the Coloured vote by Parliament's refusal to extend it left them with diminished power and influence. The Civilized Labour Policy of 1924 and the Apprenticeship Act of 1922 further restricted Coloureds by limiting the mobility of skilled workers in terms of employment and training opportunities.' The Civilized Labour Policy promoted the employment of Whites over Coloureds and ensured that Coloureds were not appointed to positions higher than that of Whites. This served to severely limit the prospects of economic mobility for skilled Coloured workers. The Apprentice Act set high education standards as entry requirements for artisan apprentice positions, which made entry into these fields very difficult for Coloureds as they were the products of Mission schools and generally poor education. The Act set standard six as the minimum required to enter into apprenticeship and very few Coloureds proceeded to high schools thus excluding the majority of Coloureds from access to skilled work.

⁷⁰ Goldin I, Making Race, p37

⁷¹ Goldin, I: Making Race, p41

The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 and the Wage Act of 1925 further eroded the Coloured workers' likelihood for employment and advancement by sanctioning the closed shop practices of White craftsmen and by preventing Coloured workers from engaging in the ability to undercut White workers in order to gain jobs.⁷²

These measures effectively limited the Coloured population to positions of unskilled labour or teaching as this was the only other option available to Coloureds. These options meant that many school leavers with a Junior Certificate or Senior Certificate⁷³ were employed in menial jobs such as sweepers and cleaners. By the 1930's the numbers of Coloured young persons taking the teaching opportunity had resulted in an over supply and many were forced to go into the rural areas to seek employment.⁷⁴

Unskilled Coloured labour was threatened by the employment of Africans that provided a cheaper pool of labour while skilled Coloured men had to compete with White men who sought to actively exclude them from various artisanal positions.

The relaxation of influx control during the war years as the need for cheap unskilled labour rose led to increasing numbers of Africans entering the Western Cape. This was reversed after lobbying by the six Coloured Councillors who expressed the displeasure of the returning Coloured soldiers with the introduction of the Consolidated Urban Areas Act in 1945. This effectively constrained the movement of Africans within restricted rural and isolated areas. They were required to have special permission in order to move out of these areas. Many of the Africans living within the urban areas were sent back to the rural areas as a result of this legislation. This would serve as the precursor for the Bantu Authorities Act which was introduced in 1951 and established a basis for ethnic governments in African reserves, known as "homelands."

While the government continued to exclude Coloureds from progressing economically during this period, they still had some political influence — even though it was being

⁷² Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p54

⁷³ Grade 10 and 12 (Metric) respectively

⁷⁴ Adhikari, M: "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teacher's League of South Africa, 1913 — 1940, p55

steadily eroded — in order to express their dissatisfaction. This facility was not an option for Africans who were even more economically exploited.

The late 1930's and the 1940's sees a definitive change in the form that Coloured politics takes: It moves from a position where leaders and more particularly one prominent leader, Dr Abdurahman, worked within the prevailing system by negotiating and petitioning the authorities in order to protect and advance Coloured interests to one where a more radical approach of boycott, mass demonstration and more pertinently a rejection of the prevailing structures takes place. This change is based on socialist principles and is led by a new faction of middle class radicals.

What was missing from this movement was the voices of the masses in terms of addressing the issues that affect the poor very directly and in the strategies that were decided upon. The leadership of these radical organisations came from middle class background and were therefore removed from the working class experience but at the same time members of the working classes had not had the advantages of being exposed to the new ideology that the leaders were asking them to accept and therefore they struggled to gain mass support. This lack of popular support and the manner in which to access it was one of the issues dividing Coloured organisations as can be seen from the two quotes below

Yet most surely revolutionary leadership does not consist in pandering to the masses when the masses must be torn away from what is definitely the wrong road. This is what we have been endeavouring to do, and will continue to do, whether it proves 'popular' or not. We are not out to win cheap effects, we are not after coveted posts and vote-catching.

(The Spark newspaper of the Sparcists who formed part of the NEUM)

Their 'non-collaboration' policy is in one sense a cover or pretext for not doing anything practical work. While I am strongly for the boycotting of the inferior institutions set up to perpetuate the oppression and

exploitation of the African people, I nevertheless do not agree that the boycott should be carried out without regard to the support we have for it.

(Excerpt from a letter from M Kotane to Z K Matthews: CPSA members)¹

These quotes illustrate the understanding that the leadership of the main Coloured organisations had with regard to the views of the 'ordinary' people. There seems to be an underlying sense of needing to direct the 'ignorant masses' for their own good. This paternalistic approach and the middle class values of the leadership resulted in their influence being limited to the literate, bourgeoisie sector of the Coloured population. This is further confirmed by Neville Alexander who states:

The vast majority of literate people in the Western Cape became politicised. The debilitating barriers of the slave mentality were gradually broken down as a new generation of young people (including artisan and clerks) left the small number of high schools in the Western Cape. Hardly any young intellectual in the Western Cape entered political life but through the portals of the NEUM. Even its opponents and rivals could not escape its all-pervasive influence.⁷⁶

(My emphasis)

There seems to be two factors at play during this period: the growth of the extra-parliamentary groups and the efforts by the government to co-opt members of the Coloured population into accepting their new form of segregated government by presenting them with structures such as the Coloured Advisory Council which purportedly would look after their interests. As the majority of the participants of the Coon Carnival were poverty-stricken, working class members, one needs to assess how they would have reacted to these changes when taking their material conditions into account.

⁷⁵ Alexander, N: Non-collaboration in the Western Cape, 1943 — 1963 in *The Angry Divide* by James, W & Simons, M, p185

⁷⁶ Alexander, N: Non-collaboration in the Western Cape, 1943 — 1963 in *The Angry Divide* by James, W & Simons, M, p184

4. Purpose of Culture

cultural adj. of or relating to the cultivation of the mind or manners esp. through artistic or intellectual activity.

culture n & v. n *1a* the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively (a city lacking in culture). *b* a refined understanding of this; intellectual development (a person of culture). *2* the customs, civilizations, and achievements of a particular time or people (studied Chinese culture). *3* improvement by mental or physical training
cultured adj. having refined taste and manners and a good education¹

The term culture is used in a vast range of contexts presently, especially in the South African context. There are phrases such as 'a culture of entitlement', 'a culture of learning', 'the dominant culture' that is used in everyday language to refer to other things other than culture such as attitude or thinking.

From the definition above there seems to be a general understanding that culture refers to the manners learnt and intellectual interaction. This is a learnt or studied form of culture, a means of understanding and appreciating forms of art. A culture that by definition is limited to the elite who would have access to the type of education that would enable them to appreciate these forms of art and would expose them to a range of cultural phenomenon. This is clearly a culture that is imposed from above and is the domain of the economically and socially dominating classes of society.

Hidden within the definition is the understanding that an interpretation of the term culture includes the common customs and traditions of communities. It is in this context that this paper wishes to look at the debate on what constitutes culture and how it should possibly be understood.

Is culture something that is owned by the elite and does it cease to be of cultural value once it is adopted by the mainstream? If it is mainstream or popular culture, who decides

¹The Concise Oxford Dictionary,

what constitutes culture? Is culture owned by any particular group and if so, how is ownership decided? How are changes within culture articulated and by whom?

The period following the Second World war saw not only many previously colonised countries gaining their independence but with it went the understanding that these countries had their own customs and traditions that formed the basis of their national character. There was a distinct departure from seeing culture as an experience limited to a selective audience to one that had a wider application in terms of popular culture. It is this understanding of popular culture that needs to be defined in order to situate the Coon Carnival within the context of a wider society in order to understand how it was perceived by its participants as well as by the observers. It is equally important to discuss the role and influence of the individuals involved in the construction of the definition of popular culture and a motivation for the examination of this topic as an academic subject. While it becomes obvious that culture may belong within a particular group for historical reasons, it is important to examine how that culture is being interpreted for a wider group of people.

The study of culture internationally was formally lead by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the late 1960's and early 1970's and is therefore still a relatively new field of study.⁷⁸ Prior to the establishment of cultural studies as a separate discipline, work of this nature would be done in the fields of Anthropology (mainly studying the culture of the colonized) or Social Studies. The study of culture up until this point was regarded as the interpretation and study of forms of art and literature and it is interesting to note that the academics that were involved in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies initially had a background in the study of English and were therefore relatively familiar with the understanding of elite culture. It is equally worthy of note that the establishment of the Centre in 1963 elicited antagonism from the Departments of English and Sociology which perceived it as an academic intrusion⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Gray, A and McGuigan, 1: Studying Culture, pvii

⁷⁹ Goodall P: High Culture, Popular Culture, p!53

One of the leading academics on the subject of culture, Raymond Williams, writing in 1958, expresses the notion that culture is ordinary and that everyday occurrences and daily life is filled with important cultural meanings that are created by the masses. He explains his thinking about popular culture in the following manner:

A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meaning, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life — the common meanings; to means the arts and learning — the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.⁸

McGuigan sees the emphasis that Williams places on the conjunction between the two types of cultures as holding back on the 'uncritical populist endorsement of mass consumption and taste'⁸ Although Williams makes the point very obviously that culture is ordinary, he maintains the notion of creativity, which underlies the traditions. The cultural customs that belong to 'ordinary' people, therefore, has to have some primary meaning and symbolism.

He was influenced by the Marxist notion that culture must be interpreted in the context of the primary system of production and he supports this theory by relating his experiences of growing up in a rural district and the influence that it had on shaping his cultural identity. He does, however, take issue with the Marxist notion of the 'ignorant masses' by

⁸ McGuigan, J: Cultural Populism, p23

⁰¹ McGuigan, 1: Cultural Populism, p23

noting that while they are excluded from the institutions of learning, they are not unaware of their position and culture. He identifies and defends a definite working class culture by saying:

There is a distinct working class way of life, which I for one value — not only because I was bred in it, for I now, in certain respects, live differently. I think this way of life, with its emphases of neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment, as expressed in the great working class political and industrial institutions, is in fact the best basis for any future English society. ⁸²

Williams rejected the notions of Leavis and Thompson, who advocated the need to discriminate with regard to culture so as to prevent the lowering of standards. This strategy was encouraged to prevent the exploitation and cheapening of culture. Leavis and Thompson suggested:

We cannot, as we might in a healthy state of culture leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment; if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and resist. ⁸³(my emphasis)

Williams felt strongly that the changing economic and social environment that society found itself in as a result of increased industrialisation was one that should be welcomed for all the positive aspects that it resulted in for the masses. Unlike Leavis, he thought that people were in a position to make their own decisions and that change need not have negative results if properly managed. He disagreed with the connections made between the increase in mass based education and the new commercial culture and the comparison that people exposed to substandard culture would themselves begin to reflect this in their behaviour and thoughts. He observed that both these equations were based on the assumption that the 'masses' were homogenous and easily influenced.

⁸² Gray, A and McGuigan I: Studying Culture, p9

⁸³ McGuigan. I: Cultural Populism, p46

Richard Hoggart's contribution to the field of cultural studies preceded his involvement as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies with the publication of his book called *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957.⁸⁴ Hoggart, who like Williams had a working class background, placed the focus not on the distinction between elite and popular culture but he began examining the ideals that served as the basis for popular culture. Hoggart started the process of critically assessing aspects and values of what was considered ordinary people's culture. In this regard, he expressed disapproval for the commercially produced and imposed mass culture while at the same time distancing himself from accepting unquestioningly whatever was produced by community arts centres. He was also very critical of what he thought of as the destructive influences of the imported American mass-produced culture. Using this thinking as the basis, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies embarked on a programme 'to evaluate' the forms of popular culture, determine their place in society and clear up the 'muddle' of the cultural debate.⁸⁵ He felt that culture that was produced by the ordinary people was worth examining in as far as it may hold any real worth and was thus not interested in mass produced culture that was imposed on and often assimilated by the populace. Hoggart it seems felt that as an academic he was in a position to determine the value of popular culture.

This approach of critically assessing popular culture was adopted by Stuart Hall who felt that while accepting the popular and modern forms of culture it was important to be able to discern the difference between what is good and bad popular forms of culture. Together with Paddy Whannel, the education officer at the British Film Institute Hall wrote:

In terms of actual quality (and it is with this, rather than with 'effects', that we are principally concerned) the struggle between what is good and worthwhile and what is shoddy and debased is not a struggle against the modern forms of communication, but a conflict within these media ...If we believe that one of the central purposes of education is to train the ability

⁸⁴ Goodall P: High Culture, Popular Culture, p162

⁸⁵ McGuigan, J: Cultural Populism, p51

*to discriminate, then we can see that the introduction of the study of the popular arts into the curriculum is less the imposition of a new subject than an extension of this basic aim to cover new and highly relevant areas of experience.*⁸⁶

The perceptions of both Hoggart, with his notion of discriminating between acceptable and undesirable forms of popular culture and Hall's advocacy of the need to train people to identify 'what is good and worthwhile' has at its basis the undertones of F R Leavis' concept of judging culture. Although both academics were researching what could simply be described as common culture, that is culture belongs to ordinary people in the way that Williams articulated, they were however, judging this culture within a similar framework as for elite culture to weigh up what would be considered acceptable or not. They were also making the assumption that ordinary folk culture is open to evaluation in the same manner and thus appointing themselves as the curators of good taste within this context. Here the question would arise as to who and what factors would determine whether traditions are valuable in cultural terms or not.

McGuigan examines the concept of cultural populism by examining the theoretical context within which popular cultural studies are conducted, looking at concrete examples of how this framework has shaped studies in popular culture and concludes by looking at instances where the theory is lacking. He thus takes the concept of popular culture and theorises about the manner in which it is being interpreted by intellectuals and academics. The definition that he proposes for the term cultural populism is:

*Cultural populism is the intellectual assumption made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C.*⁸⁷

He qualifies what is meant by 'ordinary people' by explaining that it was generally perceived as a category in opposition to intellectuals who were considered the experts on

⁸⁶ McGuigan 1: Cultural Populism, p52

⁸⁷ McGuigan, 1: Cultural Populism, p4

cultural matters. He notes that an increasing positive trend among intellectuals has been to take a non-judgemental approach to common experiences.

This role that academics and intellectuals play in the interpretation and conceptualising of popular culture has been examined by Bourdieu. He highlights the strategies employed by this group in demarcating their position within the cultural domain and deciding what constitutes learned culture and what everyday culture. He notes the fact that there exists a dominant learned culture and he observes the resistance of the masses to having a culture imposed upon them contrary to the widely held view that the masses were passive elements absorbing the prevailing accepted culture. This concept is compared to Bakhtin's work on carnival in the 1930's.⁸⁸ in which he addresses its disruptive nature and the manner in which inversion of roles is displayed, which he interprets as representing the symbolic rejection of the established structures. Bourdieu's understanding of the paradox of cultural populism is outlined by the following statement:

When the dominated quest for distinction leads the dominated to affirm what distinguishes them, that is, that in the name of which they are dominated and constituted vulgar, do we have to talk of resistance? In other words, if in order to resist, I have no other resources than to lay claim to that in the name of which I am dominated, is this resistance? Second question: when, on the other hand, the dominated work at destroying what marks them out as 'vulgar' and at appropriating that in relation to which they appear vulgar (for instance, in France, the Parisian language), is this submission? I think this is an insoluble contradiction: this contradiction, which is inscribed in the very logic of symbolic domination, is something those who talk about 'popular culture' won't admit.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Goodall, P: High Culture, Popular Culture, p70
es McGuigan, J: Cultural Populism, pp11-12

This inherent contradiction between the two types of culture is the basis for Bakhtin's hypothesis of the inversion of roles and the resistance of popular against the dominating culture. Both cultures exist simultaneously, the one considered to be the normal and leading one with the other an insubordinate, opposing one that is tolerated and allowed to have the upperhand on occasion. In the case of Bakhtin's significant work, *Rabelais and His World*, it was the occasion of the carnival where the lower or common culture dominates." The underlying feature of Bakhtin's work is his analysis of the manner in which people use the dominant culture in order to express their own values.

The question about ownership of culture is an important one when understanding popular culture and raises questions about who produces the culture. Is it a culture that is produced and sanctioned by the dominant or elite influences in society or is it culture that is determined solely by the people for their own purposes.

In Britain in the late 1970's and 1980's this debate centred around the fact that cultural forms that were being adopted by the general population was determined by the prevailing political structure and underlying this debate was the apparent populist quality of the Thatcher government.

The Coons are undoubtedly an expression of popular culture as opposed to mass culture. It is not a form of culture being produced for the masses but it was overwhelmingly produced and accepted by the masses. This was despite the prevailing middle class Coloured notions that it was vulgar, undignified and presented a caricature of Coloureds. In this sense, this type of culture was definitely 'ordinary' and any attempts to evaluate the significance of it was and is being done by mainly middle class members of the society notably, academics. In this sense, I think that this paper and those of Jeppie, Baxter and Stone fails to understand the role that the Coon carnival played/ plays in society by virtue of the fact that the analysts are attempting to write about what is obviously a working class phenomenon from an inherently middle class perspective. While academics may not be expressing the disdain that the contemporary middle class Coloured felt, they are nevertheless unable to relate to a full understanding of the

⁹ Goodall, P: High Culture, Popular Culture, p74

working class experience. Jeppie makes a reasonable attempt to begin to explain the working class experience but one begins to see the 'cultural populism' as defined by McGuigan slipping in with the significance being accorded to seemingly ordinary occupations such as cooking and sewing.⁹¹

One then needs to assess how to consider the phenomenon of the Coon Carnival and whether an analysis of the form and organization is required or whether it is sufficient to record a description of the practice and to accept that it belonged to a certain sector of the Coloured community.

In terms of examining the significance, one could possibly study the possible origins of the carnival in order to understand the symbolism of the event as opposed to the symbolism of the mannerisms and behaviour of the participants. While there appears to be no definite commencement of the Coon carnival in the form that it occurs today, there have been several possible explanations. Vivian Bickford-Smith describes the celebrations that took place in Cape Town with regard to the slave emancipation on 1 December 1885 in his discussion of traditions that gave expression to social identity. He notes, however:

*It would appear as though 'coloured bands' paraded the streets of Cape Town even before emancipation, in festivities that celebrated New Year, a slave holiday at the Cape. New Year celebrations in the form of street processions and music may have occurred by 1823. By the 1870's, many street paraders were organised into singing and sporting clubs distinguished by different uniforms. The Cape Times reported on 4 January 1886, that there were large and frivolous groups of coloured people . . . dressed most fantastically, carrying guys, and headed by blowers of wind and players of stringed instruments'.*⁹²

He proceeds to describe the New Year celebrations of the Muslim slaves and how these celebrations

⁹¹ Jeppie, S: Aspects of Popular Culture and Class Expression, p69

⁹² Bickford-Smith, V: Meanings of Freedom in Worden, N & Crais, C (eds): Breaking the Chains, p298

were occasions in which people rejoiced. . . [celebrations of].. . an identity with neighbours and kinfolk . . of defiance before the uncomprehending bourgeoisie. They were practised by people with a shared history of bondage and, at least in the case of the emancipation parades, would obviously have reminded those involved of that heritage. ⁹³

The origins proposed here are similar to the sentiment that perpetuated the Coon Carnival, that of a shared 'history of bondage'. While the bondage in the nineteenth century may have been more concrete, the burden of poverty that the Coloured community laboured under in the 1940's would have been as substantial.

Other contemporary explanations include the tradition of the slaves entertaining their overlords, the copying of American Coons who visited the Cape during the Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria ⁹⁴, the Negro slaves who escaped from ships in Cape Town and became part of the population ⁹⁵ and even the suggestion that it started as a publicity campaign of a local baker. ⁹⁶

⁹³ Bickford-Smith, V, Meanings of Freedom in Worden, N & Crais, C (eds): Breaking the Chains, p301

⁹⁴ The Cape Times 27 December 1947

⁹⁵ The Cape Times 28 December 1949

⁹⁶ The Sun 6 December 1946

5. Conclusion.

As mentioned repeatedly in this paper, the Coon carnival was an entirely working class Coloured phenomenon and it is in this light that one has to begin to understand the fact that it did not seem to change in a period of increased political radicalisation. The radicals leading the changes were members of the middle class and did not understand the working class experience and did not engage them in any real way in order to incorporate their struggles into the wider political issues. Although they may have believed that their struggle would advance all Blacks, they did not explore methods of achieving this with the co-operation of the working classes themselves. Instead they took the paternal attitude of knowing what would be right for the majority and the best manner to achieve it.

Working class struggles relate to what is generally termed 'bread and butter' issues such as the ability to provide food and shelter for their families and to have access to some form of employment. Their lives were characterised by the tedium of ensuring basic survival in increasing harsh economic conditions. These conditions meant that Marxist concepts and rhetoric were removed from their daily experiences and they would be focussing on the reality of their lives. So while organised Coloured political movements were changing in character and growing among the middle classes, working class people were still being marginalized and there seemed to be no respite from the severity of their lives. A constant, however, was the traditions and customs that had characterised their lives and served to act as a form of uplifting and reassuring ritual.

The history of Coloured organisations prior to this period indicates that some gains were seen to be made by the political organisation at the time, the African People's Organisation. They were able to secure these gains on the back of the government's Coloured Preference Policy, which they manipulated to their advantage. In contrast the rise of the radical organisations simultaneously saw the increasing segregation and marginalisation of the Coloured people, thus there seemed to be no real incentive for the working class to become actively involved as it held no concrete benefits for them. They had gained under the strategy of negotiating with the authorities and were seeing these gains being eroded.

One form of analysing the apparent lack of change within the Coon movement is to situate it within a broader context. The fact that their rights and privileges were being eroded must also be seen in the light of the wider forms of repression that were being employed by the government. Although Coloureds' political and economic position was being weakened, they were still relatively privileged compared to the measures being implemented against the African population. They were not being subjected to pass laws and restrictions on their movements; they, at this point, still had a limited franchise and therefore had a voice with which they could raise their dissatisfaction within the existing structures. The Coloured identity was very strongly connected to that of the Whites who they regarded as their cultural and social equals and the working class Coloured population despite their poverty and the limited opportunities available to them, realised that they were in a slightly more privileged position than Africans. They also realised that this privileged was as a result of the preference being given to them by the government and therefore working class communities who had the most to gain from the support of the authorities were reluctant to go against the tide. In addition, the structures being proposed by the changes seemed to have the interests of the working class at heart as they dealt with issues of employment, education and housing. They would therefore had continued associating with those in power by inviting them to the Carnivals and giving them positions of privilege as those in authority held the means to their future

An alternative analysis might be that the harshness of the increasing repression of Non-Europeans in terms of economic and political changes, would cause communities to unite thus making them adhere to traditions and customs that reaffirm their sense of community. The continuation of the rituals in the same form as before would act as a form of reassurance in their identities and would provide members of the working class with a form of release at the end of having survived another year of increasing difficulties. Here one may understand Jeppie's notion of the Carnival being an event where the participants take over space and behave in a manner that inverts their normal position of subservience. During the year, the working class endure the indignity of being

second class citizens and this ritual gives them the opportunity to reverse that and take over public spaces in a dominating manner.

In the Western Cape, we see those in power attempting to, and some may hold the view succeeding in, manipulate popular culture in order to serve their own purposes. The manner in which the authorities gave tacit, and often active, support to the Coon carnival indicates that it held some value for them. In this period, when the government was intent on forging a separate Coloured identity, in order to achieve its aims of dividing the nation into discrete groups to facilitate domination over a majority, they imposed not only economic and political measures, which achieved this, but they also supported the idea of a separate and unique cultural identity. While this identity may have existed prior to the increasing introduction of repressive laws, the government sought to consolidate it. It is with this understanding that individuals like Dr I D Du Plessis became involved in the Malay Choirs and Coon Carnivals. It was the notion that the Coloured person was uniquely different and exotic beings with a culture that would undoubtedly place them apart from White persons.

Here we see an attempt by the dominant forces to harness to culture of the ordinary people and to use it to prescribe to them. We also see the concepts identified by Hogart, Hall and Williams where there is an attempt to extract a particular type of value from the culture. It is the attempt to tweak the culture so that it takes on a form that has unique features but still fits into the framework of the dominant culture so that it may be acceptable to those who feel that they are able to evaluate culture. The success that the dominant authority has in being able to manipulate the form of culture is limited as it remains more or less the same but one begins to see the influence of the dominant forces such as the increasing use of Afrikaans.

Questions about the ownership of the culture should be raised as this is a debate that has continued up until the present. In the 1940's we see the authorities and other individuals attempting to take over the carnival in order to achieve their own purposes. These purposes range from wanting to consolidate the Coloured identity to improving the event so that it may be marketed for a wider audience. These debates have continued to date as

we find the local authorities, tourist organisations and different Boards competing for ownership of the event. The pivotal point around the ownership debate would revolve around what significance of the event holds for the various competing forces and how strong or persuasive the hold of each force would be.

It must be noted that this paper is flawed by the inherent middle class biases of the writer who concedes that this lack of real understanding of working class values and experiences severely limits the ability to analyse their behaviour.

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