



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Royal African Society

The Cape Coloured People To-day: An Address Delivered to the League of Coloured Peoples, London

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Source: *Journal of the Royal African Society*, Vol. 36, No. 144 (Jul., 1937), pp. 347-356

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Royal African Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/717605>

Accessed: 18/12/2013 02:24

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THE CAPE COLOURED PEOPLE TO-DAY
 AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE LEAGUE OF
 COLOURED PEOPLES, LONDON

ABE DESMORE

THE subject with which I have to deal occupied the First National Coloured-European Conference for three whole days during June, 1933, and it is *at the present time engaging the attention* of a Commission appointed by the Government of the Union of South Africa. It would, therefore, be presumptuous on my part to pretend to deal adequately with this vast subject, and I can discuss it only in barest outline.

In order to place the subject in its proper historical setting I shall sketch briefly the origin and distribution of the Coloured people.

ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION

The Coloured people spring from an admixture of Hottentot and European blood. The major portion of this community, in the course of their development, have attained so nearly, not only physically, but also intellectually as well as economically and socially, to the pure European type, that all traces of their Hottentot ancestry have entirely disappeared. Most of these persons have been absorbed by the white population. While it is true to say that the racial origin of the Coloured people is Hottentot-European, it should also be stated that there are small communities, as for instance in Swaziland and in Southern Rhodesia, which have come into being as the result of European and Bantu contact.

Soon after the occupation of the Cape by the Dutch, intercourse between them and the Hottentots was forbidden. In the course of time the policy of segregation broke down. As the Dutch adopted the idea of colonisation, they pushed outwards from the Cape Peninsula with the result that the

Hottentots were driven from their land and eventually became vagrants. Their wanderings affected the stability of the labour market, and laws were introduced to limit their movements, so that the settlers might secure a plentiful supply of cheap labour. The close contact which resulted between the Dutch as masters and the Hottentots as servants, in addition to the common practice of regular intermarriage, brought about the fusion of blood from which the Cape Coloured community eventually emerged.

Colenbrander in his *Registry of Cape Families between 1657 and 1805*, states that in 1663, the white adult women numbered only seventeen, and records the fact that cohabitation between white and Hottentot was common. Lady Duff Gordon makes mention of the same practice. These early unions between the races were by no means always illicit. Van Riebeeck records that Peter van Meerhof, a Dutchman of some standing, contracted a marriage with Eva, a young Hottentot woman of virtuous character.

The Cape Coloured people are to be found in all parts of South Africa, but the main part of the community is concentrated in the Cape Province. Until last year, no census of these people had been taken since 1921. Even then the census in South Africa is never a true index of racial statistics, since thousands of Coloured people register themselves as European. Taking no account of these a conservative estimate of the Coloured population is 584,000. Of this number 536,000 live in the Cape Province, 365,000 of whom are concentrated in the Western part of it.

LOW ECONOMIC POSITION

The bulk of the Coloured people form the unskilled labouring class in the urban areas. In the rural areas they comprise mainly the agricultural workers. Their economic and social status is probably as low as that of the corresponding classes in England. Let me quote briefly from the report of the Economic and Wage Commission of 1926 to indicate just how low that status is:—

" The wages for Coloured workers on farms . . . vary very considerably in different parts of that province (the Cape) and even in neighbouring districts of it. The rates paid range from 7s. 6d. per month at Oudtshoorn to 3s. 6d. a day at Caledon—in the former case with rations and some form of shelter, which together may be valued at, say, 10s. to £1 a month, and in the latter, quarters only and a plot of ground for growing vegetables, and the privilege of running a few head of stock and some poultry.

" The rates of pay of Coloured workers for unskilled work in the town range from about 3s. to 5s. per day, without any allowances or privileges. For unskilled workers in the building trades in the Cape Province a minimum rate of 7½d. per hour or 27s. 6d. for a 44 hour week has been fixed by the agreement of the National Council of the Building Industry."

A survey was recently made in Cape Town of 6,420 households. It was found that the total combined family income in 4,000 cases was less than £10 per month; 1,115 received from £8 to £10; 1,274 from £6 to £8; 1,166 from £4 to £6; 567 from £2 to £4; 171 less than £2; 466 families representing perhaps 3,000 persons had no income at all.

In regard to housing the position is serious indeed. The Director of Census in his 1921 Report warned the Government that it should plan a public policy of housing:—

" 'Most serious of all,' stated that Report, 'is the situation in the Cape Peninsula. The presence here of a large Coloured population housed under conditions unparalleled in any of the overcrowded cities of England or Scotland constitutes a danger to health and Society.' "

An official survey of selected areas in Cape Town revealed that 7,900 families lived in 3,421 houses. Altogether 43,855 persons were accommodated in 10,222 lettings. Of these 23,917 persons were living in 7,888 lettings of a single room.

Bad housing conditions and low wages are the background for a death rate and an infantile mortality rate that has an incidence twice as high as that for Europeans. The tubercular death rate for Coloured people is several times higher than for Europeans. According to 1911 census the coloured population of the Union was 529,943. By 1921 it rose to 545,548, an increase of only 3·7 per cent. as compared with 16·9 for the Natives and 19 for the Europeans.

PROGRESS

The mass of the Coloured people, as we have seen, are socially submerged. There is, however, a much smaller group which comprises the artisan class. It is not recorded how Coloured men bridged the gulf between unskilled and skilled work. The fact is that a large number are engaged in various trades. Some of the most imposing buildings in the large towns of the Cape Province have been set up by Coloured men who have acquired all the skill of the trade. The skill of the Malays who form part of the Coloured community is a matter of history. They have produced some of the best masons, plasterers and tailors, while among the Christian section of the Coloured people there are to be found some of the best carpenters, cabinet-makers and motor mechanics in South Africa. The women of this class are chiefly engaged in factory work of all types, dressmaking and millinery included, as well as in domestic service.

There is another group, smaller than the last, that comprises the more well-to-do and the professional classes. Forty years ago Coloured teachers were rare. To-day in the Cape Province there are close on 2,000 teachers who number among them a fair sprinkling of graduates with advanced degrees. The number of medical practitioners is being increased every year, while there are probably a hundred maternity nurses also fully qualified.

CAUSES OF POVERTY

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made during the last forty years the bulk of the people exist below subsistence level. It would be interesting to enquire into the causes of their poverty. There is no doubt that these lie deeply rooted in the history of South Africa. Professor Macmillan in his *Cape Coloured Question* shows very clearly that in the early part of their history the Coloured people were dispossessed of their lands. That fact was the precursor of their extreme poverty to-day. The emancipation of the slaves was one of the greatest humanitarian acts in the history

of the world. At the same time it was an act that retarded the economic and social welfare of the Coloured community in the Cape Province. The paradox can be explained by the statement that while the emancipation resulted in technical freedom, it virtually transformed the whole community into one of wage-slavery. It made dependents into helpless and hopeless vagrants. It failed utterly in that it made no provision for the transition period from slavery to economic independence.

There are certain other factors that aggravate the low economic and social position of the Coloured people. One of the most powerful in this respect is the urbanisation of the Bantu people. During the past few decades the Natives have been encouraged by employers of cheap labour to invade the Cape Province in large numbers. There they have successfully competed with the unskilled labouring class of the Coloured people and to a lesser extent with the poor whites. At one time the delivery of milk and the unskilled work connected with the building industry, to give only two instances, were wholly in the hands of Coloured people. To-day the former type of work is entirely done by Natives, while the latter is fast becoming an avenue of employment for Natives. It is true that the splendid physique and stamina of the Native have partly placed him in a favourable position, but that does not altogether explain why the Native is preferred to the Coloured man. The explanation is to be found in the view expressed by the Economic and Wage Commission of 1926 that nowhere in the world was there greater disparity between the wages of unskilled and skilled workers than in South Africa. Employers of labour claim that the exorbitant wage demands of white Trade Unions have forced them to yield to these demands at the sacrifice of the unskilled workers, namely, the Coloured people. When, therefore, Native labour became plentiful it suited the employers to take on this cheaper labour.

From below, then, the Coloured unskilled workers have had to withstand tremendous pressure from cheap Native

labour. But Coloured skilled workers have also met with considerable pressure from above, that is, in competition with Europeans. The Coloured people have produced an artisan class that is second to none in the world for efficiency and craftsmanship. Yet to-day thousands of Coloured craftsmen are walking the streets of all the towns of the Union. An explanation for this fact is to be found in the industrial and labour legislation of recent times. Legislative enactments such as the Wage Act of 1925 and the Apprenticeship Act have definitely resulted in the displacement of Coloured artisans by white. The "Civilised" labour policy of successive governments has further handicapped the Coloured people. Of course the increasing use of machinery and the recent world depression have been serious factors in unemployment, regardless of race or colour. But since the employing class in South Africa is white, the tendency has always been to retrench the Coloured workers first, when retrenchment became necessary. In the same way the legislation has operated in favour of the white workers. The Wage Act provides that after the period of apprenticeship the worker should receive a minimum that represents a big advance on apprenticeship wages. Employers, except in rare instances, prefer to pay these advanced wages to white workers.

To such an extent has displacement gone on that in some instances the ranks of the Coloured artisans have been all but depleted. The furniture industry, once almost entirely in the hands of Coloured people, is fast becoming white, while printing has ceased to afford employment for Coloured men and women. In the latter trade no Coloured apprentices are taken on to-day, while in the motor engineering industry apprenticeship ceased long ago.

The Coloured people now find themselves between the upper and the nether millstones of European competition and of Native urbanisation.

CERTAIN EFFECTS OF LOW ECONOMIC POSITION

Certain effects have followed as the result of the low economic

position of the Coloured people. In South Africa it is a distinct advantage to be white. Consequently hundreds of Coloured people "pass over" annually to the white side, a process which impoverishes the social status of the Coloured people.

What Professor MacMillan describes as the "traditional attitude of white South Africa towards the Coloured people, an attitude based on the master and servant relationship, is another effect. This has been the prevailing attitude regardless of the fact that certain Coloured groups have for generations risen above their fellows economically and socially. These groups are not admitted into social fellowship with the whites, who hold the idea of social equality in horror. On the other hand the whites are not averse from recruiting the lighter Coloured people into their own ranks. This process of absorption has gone on for three centuries, and when it is realised that no white South African family can with the least degree of certainty deny the "taint" of Colour, the social barrier becomes a hollow sham.¹

The "traditional attitude" has been responsible for a psychological effect on the Coloured people. They have been made to feel that they belong to a lower order of human beings than the whites. Consequently they have been hewers of wood and drawers of water. All initiative and ambition have been sapped out of them. Tradition has set definite bounds to their economic expansion. They are not to be found in commerce, nor to any extent in the professions. Of recent years, however, the leading Coloured groups have made determined efforts to free themselves of the old inferiority complex imposed upon them by the white people. But it will take at least another generation for the new influence to permeate the mass of the people.

Another effect has been the inability of Coloured people to take full advantage of free education. Every year an abnormally large number of pupils are forced out of school at a tender age by economic circumstances. Last year nearly

¹ On this subject, see a remarkably interesting pamphlet, *Miscegenation*, by Mr. George Findlay.

75 per cent. of the total school population in the Cape Province left school before the Standard III stage.

While there is no denying the fact that Coloured education has made phenomenal advances during the last two decades, it is admitted on all sides that it is still on a very unsatisfactory basis.

EDUCATION

Coloured education in the Cape is to-day analagous with education in England prior to the Education Act of 1870 ; that is to say, the principle of church control has been applied to it. There are 636 Church Schools as against 23 Board or State Schools. The position in regard to European education is exactly reversed. Practically all the schools are public and undenominational. The implications of this anomaly are clear. The church has had to find the capital for building schools or for the extension of existing buildings. But as the church means the Coloured congregations who have to raise money by Bazaars and Concerts for capital redemption and interest funds, the weight of the financial burden on the Coloured people can readily be appreciated. The result of church control has been dilapidated and unhygienic hovels as schools for the Coloured children.

At this stage it would be interesting to make a brief résumé of the progress of Coloured education. Before 1905 the Government gave grants-in-aid for the payment of teachers' salaries to the extent of £75 to a school with an average attendance of more than a hundred children. In 1905 the grant was increased to £2 against a local contribution of £1. The maximum salary was fixed at £112 10s. for a principal and £67 10s. for an assistant. In 1918 the grant was raised to £3 against a local contribution of £1, the maximum salary for a principal being fixed at £144 and that for an assistant £96. In 1920 the Government abolished local contributions and assumed full responsibility for the payment of salaries, but the maxima remained stationary.

During 1925 and 1930 new and improved scales were introduced, but in spite of the improvement the remuneration

of Coloured teachers still falls far short of that of European teachers.

Certain other disparities between European and Coloured education reveal the extent to which the latter is handicapped. In the first place the *par capita* subsidy grant earned by every European child is £14 14s., whereas that earned by the Coloured child is about £5 5s. In the second place European education has been compulsory for a large number of years. Compulsion has been put off for Coloured education from time to time because of certain alleged obstacles in the way of its introduction. The chief obstacle has been its denominational character. The State supports the idea of church control and then uses the fact of denominationalism as an argument against State control in Coloured education. Nor are the churches willing to relinquish their interest in Coloured education except the Dutch Reformed Church which two years ago accepted the principle of State control. But too much importance should not be attached to this declaration on the part of a denomination which has never to any extent taken an interest in Coloured education. Unless the Government is ready and willing to appropriate a large sum of money for the purchase of existing church school buildings, the principle of compulsion must be indefinitely postponed.

It must be made clear that the general desire of the Coloured people to have State control in education is by no means animated by feelings of hostility to the churches. Far from that. But they feel that the State has shirked its responsibilities and has imposed a heavy financial burden on them.

FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

It has been the policy of successive Governments to keep the white, the Coloured and the Native communities separate. Under the conditions just described such a policy must, in the absence of protective measures, inevitably lead to the deterioration of the Coloured people who will ultimately revert to the state of vagrancy which existed a century ago. Already there are signs of this tendency in the larger towns of

the Union where Coloured hooligans join with the degenerates of other races, white and black, to terrorise the law abiding and the peaceful. It seems that it is not possible for the Coloured people to continue to develop as a separate community. The future holds two alternatives: they must be absorbed either by the white community, or by the Natives.

The Coloured people have very little in common with the Natives. Their basic stock is not Bantu. With the first admixture of blood three hundred years ago, they were born into the culture and traditions of the white race. European civilisation was not acquired but inherited by them. They have helped to build the cities and towns of South Africa and to develop agriculture and industry in that country. They have consistently stood by the whites in all their conflicts with the Natives. They have practically formed part of the white population. If, however, white South Africa continues to reject the claims of the Coloured people for equal treatment, they will unhesitatingly side with the Bantu and play a leading rôle among that restless multitude of black people that will bode no good for white domination in South Africa.