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# Some Reflections on Identity and Cities



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*The future of cities is rooted in historical relationships of power and is framed by continual change in identity and ownership. One can see that, in Cape Town today, a diverse and vibrant mix of people live in the city and the surrounding areas. The city has no precise identity but is filled with a historical mix of eastern, western, northern and southern individuals who have influenced the Cape Town identity. The future of Cape Town city, in part, is dependent on the identity of the dominant groups of individuals. These groups of individuals will influence infrastructure, language, policy, rights and demographics, as has been done in the past. This article reviews briefly the influence of different identities over the last several centuries, a cyclical trend that is to continue into the future.*

## Identity and Power

Identity in the Cape is far more complex than just black, white, Indian and coloured. Cape Town is steeped in rich and vibrant character, culture and *identities*. Over the years, some identities have been totally abandoned whereas others have lasted. Dominant groups of individuals have had continual sway over the direction of development and progress in the city, and this will continue to occur as the effects of globalisation are felt.<sup>1</sup>

Since colonial times, identity and power have battled against each other. Politics has been a main factor in the change of identity and the major role that different powers play in the transformation of the Cape's overall identity. Thus Rosalind Brunt (1989) has argued that "politics whose starting point is about recognising the degree to which political activity and effort, involves a continuous process of making and remaking ourselves and ourselves in relation to others."<sup>2</sup>

Many identities have been forced to change over the years as power and politics overrode any identity that was seen to be inferior. The change in identity has also come about due to individuals wanting to subsume different identities to fit in.

Many researchers have challenged the meaning of identity and how it is shaped. Some say that it is socially constructed and others believe it is rooted in an individual's "pre-given" essence.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the work of Freud and Marx, Keith and Pile argue that "identity is constructed through structural processes rather than being natural."<sup>4</sup> In this article this approach will be used to examine and explain the different identities of Kalk Bay and Simon's Town.

## Brief History of the Cape East Coast

The colonial and apartheid eras have had significant influences in dramatically altering communities such as those of Kalk Bay and Simon's Town, and the varying and vibrant distinctions between communities along the Cape east coast.<sup>5</sup> Many historical buildings and towns still exist along the Cape east coast and the demographics of today are primarily due to the colonial power play of the 1700/1800s. Today's infrastructure and location of ports, such as Simon's Town and Kalk Bay, were built to link colonial settlements along the Cape east coast with the main city.<sup>6</sup>

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It is important to understand that Kalk Bay and Simon's Town were integral in the functioning of colonial powers in the late 1600s to 1800s.<sup>7</sup> The Dutch proclaimed Simon's Town Bay an anchorage for their ships during the winter months from as early as 1742 as the bay allowed for protection from harsh winds and sea swells. It was named after the Dutch Governor of the Cape, Simon van der Stel (1677 – 1699) who expanded "Jan Van Riebeeck's garden". Kalk Bay name

derived from the Dutch word for "lime". Limekilns were built to produce kalk from the shore's shell deposits. The kalk was then transported to the city to be used as construction material.

Due to the harsh climate conditions, the quick sands and rough terrain with little or no infrastructure, it was difficult for supplies to enter and leave the Bay. Therefore, in time, Kalk Bay became a mini port that transported all raw materials, and construction matter from the city across to the Simon's Town Bay where ships, from the Dutch East Indian Company, were docked.<sup>8</sup> The town of Kalk Bay began to grow until the occupation by the British after 1795, and a proper road was constructed straight to Simon's Town, by-passing Kalk Bay all together.<sup>9</sup> By 1820 Kalk Bay became the central attraction for whaling as it had been banned in Simon's Town due to the horrendous smell and unhygienic nature of culling.<sup>10</sup> Kalk Bay became famous for its whaling stations in the Cape, while Simon's Town and the rest of the Cape became prominent for its agriculture, military defence and wine

production.<sup>11</sup> However 1835 saw the almost total extinction of the Southern Right Whale as whaling became an industrially focused activity all around the east coast. By this time, the British had full control over the Cape area and buildings such as the Holy Trinity Church of 1873, highlighted the area as an Anglican Christian area under British control and dominance. The railroad was built in 1883 and by 1913 Kalk Bay grew both economically and demographically as the early post colonial era saw the construction of more houses, hostels, and shops.<sup>12</sup>

## Identity challenge and change in Kalk Bay

Three main occasions in the last 200 years has seen the shift and change of identity due to changing power relations in the Kalk Bay region. The Khoisan of the Cape Peninsula are considered to be the first inhabitants of the region, before the Portuguese, Dutch and the British colonials.<sup>13</sup> They were widely dispersed over the Cape area and were dependant on their rudimentary agricultural farming practices and the local wildlife.<sup>14</sup>

The first wave of identity change occurred when the colonials first came upon the Khoisan who, in time, were alienated from and marginalised by the colonials as they had neither strong political organisation nor economic holdings.<sup>15</sup> As colonial companies started to establish farms in the area, the Khoisan were displaced and eventually started to diminish in population. This led to the breakdown of an indigenous society and the consolidation of the powerful Dutch “conquered” territory. The Khoisan people were forced into slavery by the Dutch Military control in the 1670s as they were the main source of income labour.<sup>16</sup>

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In 1713, the Sonqua, another indigenous group who also resided in the region, lost their battle over territory against the more powerful Dutch. They too eventually lost their rights to live in the area and were forced into slavery, working for the Dutch. Over time, the cohabitation of the Dutch with the Sonqua and Khoisan led to the reproduction of a new identity of people, the Cape Coloureds. These individuals created their own communities and adopted cultures and identities from the Dutch and the indigenous population.

The second wave of identity change accorded when, in 1840, a Filipino ship sunk and most of its crew managed to swim to the shores of Kalk Bay. The Filipinos quickly adopted the land as their own and with time, a dominant figure, Felix Forez developed further infrastructure and extended the port. The 1850s saw a mass exodus of Filipinos fleeing the Philippines due to political instability, riots, and food insecurity. Many Filipinos relocated to the Cape east coast and Kalk Bay, in particular, to join their families in an attempt to provide a better livelihood.<sup>17</sup> The identity in the region was now a mix of Sonqua, Khoisan, Dutch and Filipinos. Again, cohabitation of all identities resulted in intermarriages.<sup>18</sup> The expansion of the Filipino community is still evident in Kalk Bay today. Names such as de la Cruz and Fernandez, all descendants of the Filipino families are seen in schools, shops and clinics in the area.

A third wave of identity change occurred when the Dutch East Indian Company brought in slaves from Batavia, Malaysia and Java.<sup>19</sup> Many of these individuals were agricultural farmers or skilled fisherman who were integral to the survival and

development of the fishing town of Kalk Bay.<sup>20</sup> There was no longer a predominant culture of identity in Kalk Bay but rather a mingling of inhabitants, slave or free, indigenous and colonials, North, East and Western civilisations.<sup>21</sup>

The society of Kalk Bay and, indeed in the wider Cape Region was seen as very diverse in nationality, race and language. This, in turn, created new identities. Thus Dutch Reform Ministers, the Dutch Company officials, the Afrikaner trekboers and colonists, the minority of Khoisan and Sonqua still surviving, the slaves of diverse nationalities and the newly formed Cape Coloured people, all shaped the identity profile of the Cape.<sup>22</sup>

The Afrikaans language emerged and became the new form of communication around the area. It is important to highlight that Afrikaans is a variant of Dutch. Afrikaans was understood by the Dutch but shows that the Dutch colonials were also subject to and influenced by the adaption of the behaviour patterns of the surrounding culture and identities even though they controlled the region.

## Modern Times

With the creation of the Union in 1910, and with the pre-existing rights of the former colonials carried over into the Union, the indigenous population was effectively excluded from the formal political processes as South Africa was launched on its apartheid trajectory. The South African Native National Congress, the ANC of later

years formed to resist this exclusion.<sup>24</sup> The underlying identity politics also manifested itself up north when Hertzog formed the National Party in 1912 to ensure that the identity of the Afrikaners was protected and preserved.

During the post colonial apartheid era, the area of Kalk Bay Town was minimally affected by the Group Areas legislation enforced by the South African government.<sup>25</sup> The area was diverse in culture and identities and many “white” South African’s didn’t

actually reside in the area. In addition, the amount of fish available was diminishing and therefore the survival of many people became hampered as they could not longer provide for their families and had to move on.<sup>26</sup>

However, the area of Simon’s Town was heavily hit by the Group Areas Act as white people (Afrikaners and British) were allowed to reside, but many coloured families, whose family history dated back to the era of Dutch Governor of the Cape, Simon van der Stel, were relocated to areas such as Kalk Bay or forced to live elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Much of the infrastructure in the area, such as houses and shops, became dilapidated and were eventually removed and new buildings built. In addition, Simon’s Town became the focus of naval activity. This is important as today museums and other societies are trying to claim back and restore the identities of history and culture that once lived there.

Since the abolition of apartheid in 1994, Kalk Bay has yet again changed in character and identity. It no longer primarily operates as a large fishing village but as a tourist attraction for many foreigners as well as locals. Kalk Bay also boasts a large number of antique shops. Many fishing trawlers still operate but only provide for the local community. The majority of the population are Coloured people and well as people

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Simonstown.

who are descended from British, Dutch and Filipino waves of migration.

Without understanding the history that provoked the power and identity battles in the Cape Region, and specifically Kalk Bay and Simon's Town, one cannot fully identify the deep cultural, political and social connotations that shaped and formed the diverse identities of the region. Kalk Bay and Simon's Town are just two examples of continual identity change that occurs in most regions around the world, contributing the diverse culture, landscape and development of cities.

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#### NOTES

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- 2 Keith, M and Pile S. (1993). *Place and the politics of identity*: Liz Bondi Chapter 5: Locating identity politics. *Journal of urban studies*.
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