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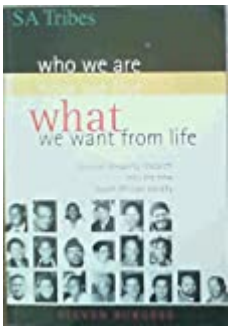

Steven Burgess. *SA Tribes: Who We Are, How We Live and What We Want from Life in the New South Africa.* Cape Town: David Philip, 2002. iii + 138 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-0-86486-598-4.

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Identity-talk is big in contemporary South African popular and academic discourse. After a one-week stay in Cape Town, a visiting anthropologist colleague from Sweden recently remarked with some astonishment that "identity" had been the hottest topic wherever he went to meet students and faculty at the University of the Western Cape.

Recent critical social and cultural studies, such as those published in the Social Identities South Africa (SISA) series, have focused on the complex processes of identity formation in the South African past and present.[1] With their emphasis on historical continuities and ruptures, and on the parts played by popular culture and mass media in identity formation, these studies have turned away from the still so commonplace conflation of identity with ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, "race" in more traditional identity studies.[2]

The publication under review does not fall within the category of the newer, more innovative South African identity studies; nor does it fall within the range of the more conventional studies of "race" and ethnicity. It is one of a new kind of South African publications and teachings on "diversity" that attempt to put social and cultural studies concepts, ranging from "identity" through to "culture shock" and "multiculturalism," to practical use in the field of business and commerce. While such writings are clearly not, or not exclusively, directed at an academic audience, they still need to be examined in the context of existing identity studies.

SA Tribes: Who We Are, How We Live and What We Want from Life in the New South Africa is based on market research which was conducted in co-operation with the leading South African marketing company, Markinor. The author, Steven Burgess, is Professor of Business Administration in Marketing in the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town.

Based on representative survey research with approximately 10,500 South Africans in the late 1990s, *SA Tribes* began as a study "to help companies understand how South Africans were changing and what the commercial implications of that change were" (p. 2). Over time, it became apparent that the study could contribute to a more comprehensive aim of helping ordinary South Africans to identify their commonality, in order to rise above the differences that have become artificially magnified by Apartheid-era propaganda, or so the author introduces the aims of the study.

The slim volume addresses consumer behaviour as well as other observable characteristics of people, their values, lifestyles, and social and political attitudes. Following Tajfel's rather dated social psychological argu-

ment,[3] Burgess argues that this amalgam constitutes a person's "social identity," which he defines as "the perceptions a person holds about 'who I am' in my role as a member of an emotionally important social group or category" (p. 14).

As to the relevant categories in post apartheid South Africa, he identifies fourteen "tribes," falling into four broader brackets. In the book's core chapter, Burgess presents them one by one, moving up from, in his words, "the lowest levels of human development to the highest" (p. 51). Unsurprising for a market research-based effort, at a first glance, his categories appear to be based primarily on consumer behavioral patterns, with the "lowest" bracket being labelled "rural survivalists," followed in ascending order by "emerging consumers," "urban middle class," and "urban elite." The tribal profiling reveals, however, that the study's determinants comprise in addition to consumer behaviour, wider patterns of people's living standard, as well as their geographical location and, most prominently, "race" and ethnicity as the relevant characteristics of contemporary South Africans.

The reader learns that Burgess's "tribe" with the lowest level of human development, dubbed "Agrarian Lifestyles," are "black African people living in rural areas and comprise 12.8 percent of the entire South African population. 35 percent speak Xhosa as their home language and another 31 percent speak Zulu. 39 percent of them live in traditional huts and some 46 percent of all people who live in huts are part of this group. More than 93 percent do not have any of the basic living standard measures: no electricity, no running water, no radio or TV, no telephone. They have received very little education. 56 percent have not completed primary school and 20 percent have received no formal education at all. 73 percent of Agrarian Lifestyles are unemployed and 19 percent can find only unskilled labour positions. Only one in three who work–7 percent of the total–have an account of any kind with a bank. When asked what is most important in life, they indicate overwhelmingly that it is having a job. They place lowest value on stimulation and power and above average importance on tradition and conformity" (pp. 51-52).

At the top end of Burgess's human development scale, we find the "Achievers" whose "standard of living is the highest in South Africa. Accounting for just 2.7 percent of the population, they live a life of material ease compared to others. They are primarily white people (91 percent) who speak Afrikaans (72 percent) or English (28 percent) in the home and reside in a suburban home (93 percent) located in a major metropolitan area. Their educational and commercial attainments allow Achievers to enjoy a standard of living enjoyed by few people in the world. It is a lifestyle characterised by all of the modern technical advances and conveniences. Two-thirds of households have personal computers and half of them are connected to the internet. Two-thirds also have MNet (pay TV) and 27 percent have DStv (satellite TV). There are 2.1 cars per household, 89 percent have a cellular telephone and 88 percent a Telkom (landline) phone. Their value priorities are unique. They place higher importance on self-direction than any other tribe. Benevolence is also of vital importance. Power and hedonism are generally more important to them than others, but do not rise to a higher level than what could be called moderate importance" (pp. 66-67).

These findings are fairly predictable, of course. Why such extensive quotes then? I thought them helpful for problematizing certain uses of the "(social) identity" concept that have emerged in the postapartheid discourse. For one, despite Burgess's repeated emphatic claims that the postapartheid society needs to overcome "race" as the primary marker of identity, his categorization relies primarily on the very same ascriptions, as becomes evident in the largely homogeneous racial and ethnic composition of his "tribes."

Burgess's usage of the term "tribe" itself, applied as it were without any indication of ironic distance, suggests an assumption of static identity categories that conflate "race," ethnicity and lifestyle. While "tribe" lost its crucial position in disaggregating the South African population already during the 1960s,[4] its use remains commonplace and unquestioned in everyday popular parlance within (and beyond) the circles of the new commercial or social diversity management enterprises. In contemporary South African identity talk, "tribe," and to an even larger extent, "race" and "culture" (conflated with ethnicity) remain ostensibly self-evident identifications. Eleven years into the postapartheid era, many South Africans of all hues firmly believe that everyone belongs to, as well as has a stake in, a specific "culture" (alternatively referred to as "tribe") as well as being a member of a specific "race" group.

Back in 1988, a group of South African anthropologists, then mostly based at the University of Cape Town, published *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts.*[5] The editors and authors of this modest publication took it upon themselves to deconstruct the notion of separate racial and ethnic "communities"

within South African society. It is a sad indication, perhaps, of the prevailing postapartheid identity discourse that, seventeen years later *Keywords* remains an indispensable tool for unpacking South African social identities in the classroom and in the badly needed efforts of critiquing publications such as Burgess's that keep on representing, and thus reconstructing, separate identities as self-evident.

Notes

[1]. Abebe Zegeye, ed., *Social Identities in the New South Africa: After Apartheid*, vol. 1 (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001); Robert Kriger and Abebe Zegeye, eds., *Culture in the New South Africa: After Apartheid*, vol. 2 (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001); Rehana Ebr-Vally, *Caste and Colour in South Africa* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001); Zimitri Erasmus, ed., *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001); Marilet Sienaert, *The I of the Beholder: Identity Formation in the Art and Writing of Breyten Breytenbach* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001); Herman Wasserman and Sean Jacobs, eds., *Shifting Selves: Post-Apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2003).

[2]. See for example Simon Bekker, Martine Dodds and Meshack M. Khosa, eds., *Shifting African Identities* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 2001).

[3] Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behavior," *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (1974): pp. 65-83.

[4] Peter Skalnik, "Tribe as colonial category," in *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts*, eds. Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), pp. 68-78

[5] Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp, eds., *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

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