

## Review

### COLOURED IDENTITY?

A Review of Mohamed Adhikari (1993) - *"Let us live for our children" : The Teachers' League of South Africa, 1913-1940* (Cape Town: Buchu Books).

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Recent events in South African history are bound to stimulate wide-ranging debate and new questions about the uses of the past, and the links between past and present. Explanations for the victory of the National Party in the Western Cape will, in particular, have to be sought both in the recent and deeper past. To impact on and change this constellation of forces in the future, the social dynamics and politics of the Western Cape will need to be analysed and understood. Mohamed Adhikari's book on the Teachers' League of South Africa between 1913 and 1940, *"Let Us Live for our Children"*, is one that casts light on both a forgotten, but moderate, history of the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA), and also elements of the conservatism which has historically characterised the social life of a large section of the coloured community in the Western Cape. Central to the assimilationism, pragmatism and incrementalism that characterised the politics of the TLSA in this period is the question and concept of coloured identity.

Eschewing the harshly judgmental characterisation of the coloured political leadership of the early twentieth century as opportunist sycophants who were 'racist', 'reactionary' and 'collaborationist', Adhikari seeks instead to make sense of the actions and beliefs of the TLSA in terms of the context of the period: the ineluctable growth of segregationist and discriminatory measures which ate away at both the political aspirations and socio-economic opportunities open to a coloured community assimilated into Western bourgeois culture, as well as the structural marginality and residual character of the coloured community. Coloured identity was thus defined by a process of exclusion.

In this context, rather than seeking full assimilation, the TLSA, founded in 1913, sought accommodation within the prevailing political order on terms that created a status of relative privilege for themselves. It mobilised support on the basis of coloured identity and fostered professional solidarity amongst coloured teachers. In order to secure concessions and reforms, the TLSA played the racial

order, developing cooperative relationships with both church and state, and accepting an inferior status in relation to whites in order to be able to bargain for a position superior to that of Africans. Acquiescence in the racial hierarchy and accommodation with white supremacism appeared to be not only the only realistic option but was also, argues, Adhikari, a direct result of its intermediate position and lack of political and economic power.

The most consistent aspects of its behaviour and ideology, however, included an overriding unerring faith in the importance of education to society; a belief that Western bourgeois culture represented the apogee of human achievement; a strong feeling that coloured teachers could best serve the interests of coloured youth; a practical separation of education from politics, but a real and close relationship with the moderate African Political Organisation (APO) whose basic political approach and assumptions it shared, and a commitment to compromise and cooperation to the point of obsequiousness. The League was seldom outspoken; even in the face of continually deteriorating conditions, and the manifest futility of this approach, it was at pains to keep its relationships with the Cape Education Department, the (white) South African Teachers' Association and Provincial Council on a good footing.

Adhikari briefly also draws attention to the continuities between the moderates and radicals of the 1930s and 1940s. These are shown to centre on 'the ambiguities and contradictions that came with the baggage of coloured identity and status' (1993:180), and which, in a different period, continued to derive from coloured marginality. A fuller assessment of the continuity in the nature of the commitment to education would have been useful. What seems to have set the early TLSA apart from the later was its deep antipathy to confrontation and militancy. These differences cannot be explained by reference to the question of marginality. Adhikari hints at the religious foundation of the fear of conflict and confrontation; a fuller exploration of these issues may have been valuable. Adhikari also makes some interesting, almost obligatory remarks about gender, pointing to the fact that this appeared to be 'no problem' as far as participation in the League itself was concerned, but that white women, both through their enfranchisement at the expense of coloured voters, as well as in their role in school management, were a source of conflict. If it was indeed the case that women participated equally with men in the TLSA, then it would be interesting to know why, and how compared to participation by women in African and white teacher organisations, for example.

The value of this book is thus threefold: its sketch of the relationship between teacher politics and the wider social, political and educational history in this period; its anatomy of the social consciousness of the coloured petty bourgeoisie as reflected in the TLSA; and its nuanced consideration of the creation of

coloured social identity, and the role of teachers in it. We have here a sympathetic but not uncritical reading of the early history of the TLSA; a careful and considered plea for understanding identity and politics in context; and a vital reminder of some of the sources of compromise and cooperation in South African society. It provides an important addition to educational history in South Africa, and a stimulus for further work in the area.