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Nation in Flux

The New South Africa Sheds Calvinist Past And Mutates Daily

Pornography is Flourishing,
As Are Worries About It;
People Debate Everything

Crime and Strange Alliances

By KEN WELLS

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CAPE TOWN, South Africa — At the Manenberg Jazz Cafe here, the rainbow aspirations of the new South Africa are in full bloom. The place is packed; Castle beer is flowing; a band — with a black rhythm section and a white horn section — is playing a kind of funky, white-Afro fusion.

On a small dance floor, a black woman in long braids and a white man in rugby attire are engaging in some serious romantic posturing. A lesbian couple, standing near the bar, sways to the music. Such liaisons — public ones, at least — were socially unthinkable (in fact, illegal) only a short while ago.

Among the revelers, 20-year-old Tsinge Mguma, has come with his girlfriend; he is black, she is "colored," the designation for South Africa's mixed-raced people. Interracial dating is merely part of the dizzying pace of change, says Mr. Mguma. Some people don't like it, but they will just have to get used to it. His advice: "You must be a little crazy to live in South Africa. Above all, you *must* party."

Brave New World

A year into its experiment in nonracial democracy, South Africa is a place where all the old rules have largely been thrown out, and new ones are being written, and rewritten, daily. The country has gone, seemingly overnight, from one of the world's most oppressed and repressed to one of the world's most open and permissive. It has peeled off the Calvinism that suffused the old white state, but hasn't quite decided what to replace it with.

In the meantime, South Africans seem determined to celebrate, fret over and debate their rapidly changing society, and new-found freedoms, with equal amounts of zeal, dismay and candor. This makes for a rather schizophrenic culture; energized and optimistic one moment, neurotic and pessimistic the next. "When everything is shifting, coping is both enormously hard and enormously interesting," says Carole Johannes, a secretary lunching one day at a sidewalk bistro that is part of Cape Town's thriving cafe society.

Signs of the Times

The signs of change are everywhere. The press, after years of censorship, has grown lively and fractious, turning its pens on wayward politicians with a zeal that has even left the African National Congress — Nelson Mandela's party, and long a media darling — grumbling. The day after police revealed that an ANC parliamentarian was among a number of politicians packing weapons in the National Assembly, the Sowetan newspaper ran a cartoon showing multiracial parliamentarians debating a point of order — by pointing grenade launchers at each other.

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No-holds-barred talk radio has blossomed. On one recent evening, a psychologist fielded an hour of phone calls — on the joys of guilt-free masturbation. This isn't surprising; the sex trade, though technically illegal in this country of 41 million, seems to be flourishing. A recent issue of a Cape Town newspaper included five columns of classified advertising for massage parlors — never mind another three columns for escort agencies.

Gay rights and abortion rights, taboo subjects just a year or two ago, are being debated vigorously by the public and politicians. Homosexual-rights marches, unheard of except on college campuses, now routinely take place in South Africa's major cities. Pornography is flourishing — as are efforts by organized religion, and a nascent feminist movement, to curb it.

Liberal Constitution

Much of this is simply the byproduct of the world's newest democracy flexing its muscles under an interim constitution that is considered perhaps the world's most liberal in its sanctioning of individual liberties. Pornography is a prime example. While the rigid antipornography laws of the old South Africa technically remain on the books, they go largely unenforced because authorities believe they won't survive a constitutional challenge.

Thus, in the last year, supermarket magazine shelves have exploded with sexually explicit magazines, including Hustler and a dozen Penthouse-styled copycats. This in a country where, as late as April 1994, photographs of female breasts couldn't be published without a censor's star covering the nipples.

How all this will turn out is anyone's guess. Elected a little more than a year ago, South Africa's Government of National Unity under Mr. Mandela essentially has four more years to draft a permanent constitution while rewriting, where deemed necessary, the outmoded codes of the former white government.

The liberal ANC has a solid majority in the new Parliament. Yet things that might seem on the surface a shoo-in — legalizing abortion on demand, for example — aren't turning out to be so clear-cut, as unlikely alliances form over various issues. One example: The nation's 31 million blacks overwhelmingly belong to the ANC. Yet on the abortion issue, ANC proponents of unrestricted abortion are beginning to

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meet stiff resistance from black Zionist churches, which are socially conservative — and have enormous memberships. Throw in Muslim groups and white conservatives, both opposed to abortion on religious grounds, and "a change in abortion laws starts to look less certain," says one ANC insider.

Unlikely Alliance

Some dreams of the new South Africa sound suspiciously like the dreams of the old South Africa. Consider the Freedom Front, the far-right party of Afrikaners, or descendants of South Africa's original Dutch settlers, who still dream of establishing a white homeland, or *volkstaat*. You might think, given that Afrikaners invented apartheid, this is causing consternation here.

Actually, for now, it isn't. Of all the unlikely alliances, the ANC has agreed to consider a Freedom Front proposal, based upon a continuing government-sanctioned study, that might lead to some sort of limited Afrikaner *volkstaat*. Says Pieter Gous, a Freedom Front official: "We have found the ANC quite easy to work with."

This is a rather startling statement coming from an operative of a party whose more radical members thought a race war might have been better than a triumph by the ANC at the polls. But, at the last minute, the Freedom Front, under retired South African army General Constand Viljoen, cast itself into last year's elections, the general having concluded that negotiations might win what a war would certainly not. That act was pivotal in defusing right-wing violence that threatened to sabotage the elections.

Now, a year later, General Viljoen (pronounced Will-YOON) cuts quite a figure in South Africa's Parliament. He is considered to be a man of principle-skewed though his politics appear to many. He and Mr. Mandela, ANC insiders say, get along well. And Mr. Mandela, who has proven himself a gifted statesman, takes the rainbow aspirations of his new nation seriously. The white tribe of Africa, as many descendants of the nation's original Dutch settlers see themselves, certainly has a place here. If a reasonable compromise can be struck that diffuses Afrikaner frustrations and anger, then why not try to accommodate them?

No one believes a *volkstaat* would be the kind of place where nonwhites are disenfranchised — the ANC is not *that* obliging. But it might be the kind of place, a particular province for example, where, if enough Afrikaners are willing to voluntarily settle there, they could load the voting rolls so as to form a provincial majority — in charge of the region's purse strings and cultural institutions, including schools.

Whether this can actually work isn't clear. The Freedom Front collected only 2% of the vote in last year's elections. Most Afrikaners have cast their lot with F.W. de Klerk's National Party, and its vision of an integrated country with guaranteed minor-

Furthermore, Afrikaners have traditionally relied upon cheap and plentiful black labor for virtually all of their enterprises, including farming. Could they realistically attract enough whites — most of them used to middle-class privilege — to do the menial labor in their homeland?

"It's a problem," concedes Mr. Gous. "But, if there is to be a *volkstaat*, the Afrikaner has to learn how to sweep the streets and work with his hands."

Says an ANC spokesman: "This isn't an issue high on anybody's list but it will get a hearing. On the other hand, we think they'll find it impossible to achieve."

Epidemic of Violence

On a balmy Indian-summer day near Johannesburg, a mostly white crowd has come to mix at a Sunday market that collects organically grown produce from nearby farms to resell to the Johannesburg gourmet set. But low-key chitchat about the virtues of pesticide-free avocado farming soon turns to what all South Africans, black and white, eventually end up talking about: crime, the bane of the new anything-goes South Africa.

Before last year's elections, political violence came close to wrenching the country apart. Now, an epidemic of violent crime has replaced it, especially in and around Gauteng, the newly named province that includes the sprawling urban center of Johannesburg. A car a day is hijacked there — and drivers who resist are routinely roughed up or murdered. Muggings have become so common in Johannesburg's city center that the five-star Carlton Centre Hotel has dispatched a 70-strong security force on the streets to protect its guests. But wherever you go in South Africa, everyone seems to have a horror story.

The Smiths, who have come to drop off their organically grown vegetables at the market here, have a story of their own. They are New Age types — into yoga and strict vegetarianism. They cultivate a kind of studied attitude of mellowness — except when they talk about crime.

Twice now they have left their farm in rural Gauteng (formerly Transvaal), and twice now it has been ransacked by burglars. The last time, the thieves took everything, including their clothes. Now, they say, they simply don't travel anymore. They are afraid to go away for more than a morning or afternoon for fear of another break-in. They feel like prisoners on their own property.

The pair think of themselves as white liberals. But they clearly expect more of the new South Africa. They make no bones about it: In their view, crime here wears a black face, and the new government seems incapable of dealing with it. "I can't tell you — the level of apprehension among whites in this country — well, it's just awful," says Sandra Smith.

Many blacks, of course, point out that at least some of the so-called black-on-black violence that marred the run-up to last year's election was encouraged by rightist elements within the white govern-

ment — elements intent on fomenting deep divisions within the anti-apartheid community. Blacks also argue that apartheid's legacy of racism, poverty, illiteracy and social desolation in large part help explain the current crime wave.

That said, the Smiths get much sympathy from large segments of the black community. For while whites worry about crime — and stories about Johannesburg stockbrokers being hauled out of their BMWs and shot make the headlines — blacks are most often victimized by it.

Out on the windblown flats of Cape Town, Rose Maso is one of a group of women struggling to move her family from the dangerous climes of Khayelitsha, a notorious slum east of Cape Town, to a more secure neighborhood which is soon to be built here. Before the elections, the township was a hotbed of political violence — often manifesting itself in "taxi wars" as rivals shot up each other's drivers and passengers. Some think all that has changed is the label; on one recent weekend there were six murders in Khayelitsha, most related to robbery.

"Shooting, stealing — the people can't live like that," says Mrs. Maso. "We must get out of there." On a list for a government housing subsidy, Mrs. Maso is one of the lucky ones. The bulk of the poor in Khayelitsha have no place to go.

The ANC party line is that crime ought to decrease as the economy expands and creates more jobs. In the interim, South Africans fret and try to make the best of it. One writer recently even suggested a kind of Zen approach to the car hijacking. "Lock into the frequency of your hijackers," he recommended. "Remain absolutely calm and deliberate." And pray that they only take the car.

Work Force Shake-Up

Next to crime, the shock wave of greatest voltage moving through white South Africa is one getting a lot of attention in America: affirmative action. The government has made no bones about the need — real and political — to move people of color into the economic mainstream. About 45% of blacks are unemployed; owing to apartheid, few blacks hold managerial and civil-service positions.

Now, major South African employers, under government prodding, have begun to seriously shake up the work force. Telkom, the big public utility, is a typical example. It has pledged that 70% of its clerical posts, and half the positions it reserves for college graduates, will go to blacks until at least the year 2000.

For whites, long accustomed to sitting atop the economic heap, the shock is just settling in. Indeed, at Johannesburg's Rand Afrikaans University, recent graduates complain that they are facing the worst job market — for whites, at least — in history. This at a time when a newspaper carried a cartoon satirizing South African corporations for practically kidnapping black applicants from college campuses.

White middle managers, some of whom were on fast-track positions at major cor-

porations, say frankly that their careers have been put on hold for five years while the affirmative-action machinery goes about equalizing the system. One such manager, who declines to be named, puts the white attitude this way. "Whites understand the need for affirmative action, but of course everyone wants the other guy to pay the price." In his case, he recently left a major company when it became clear that its affirmative-action goals had slowed his promotions. Now, he has pitched in with partners to start their own concern.

Others are voting with their feet. Government statistics show about 4,800 "economically active" South Africans left the country last year; virtually all of them were white, and 70% of those were middle managers or higher. Opponents of affirmative action use migration statistics to argue that South Africa can ill afford to discourage whites and drive them from the system at a time when the country is critically short of managers. But some whites wonder what all the fuss is about, given the cascade of opportunities in South Africa's new, open society. "South Africa is America in the 1950s in terms of opportunity," says Stephen Francis, a Johannesburg writer.

Talking Rugby

South Africa now has 11 official languages. Three of them could be heard as announcers rotated during the same television broadcast recently when the Springboks, South Africa's national rugby team, upset heavily favored Australia in the Rugby World Cup championships that are being played here now. Thus, during a critical juncture of the game, whites who speak English and Afrikaans were forced to listen to the play-by-play in Xhosa, while blacks who only speak Xhosa felt left out in the early periods. Before the game, this had been considered something of an outrage.

But after the game, when the Aussies had been routed, nobody cared. For didn't South Africa, which has been operating on miracles for the past couple of years, pull off another one? Wasn't it keen that Nelson Mandela, with his funny colored shirt, was in the stands rooting for this team of mostly upper-class whites? Though he was never a rugby man himself, didn't he give the team a splendid pep talk when he told members that they stood for the aspirations of South Africans black and white? On such a propitious day, wasn't it easy to believe that fractious South Africa might actually mutate into something that actually feels like one country?

"Absolutely possible," says Julia Hart, a white Capetonian and rugby fan and—like enormous numbers of white South Africans—a fan of Mr. Mandela. After the game, Ms. Hart celebrated with friends at a *braai*, or barbecue. Only two things were discussed: how wonderful the Springboks played, and how lucky the country is to have Mr. Mandela.