

## **The Social Politics of the Coloured Identity: A Reflection and Defence by Wendell C. Ockert**

Every few years the internet collectively happens upon a group of South Africans calling themselves coloured. In recent memory, South African singer Tyla's identity was thoroughly scrutinized by the chronically online Americans; sparking contentious debate once again. At its essence; a divide exists, one group sees the term as racially prejudiced due to their historical relationship with it, while coloured South Africans proudly claim it as their identity, heritage, and culture. My orientation is simple; this is who I am and I am proud of it. The context of a word determines its meaning-and neither I, nor my experiences will be erased by people unable to conceptualize the importance of context.

But first, let us dive into how I got dragged into this debate. On a recent exchange program, I encountered an American exchange student. We clicked politically and socially, quickly finding time to relentlessly talk each other's ears off. Soon playlists were exchanged and even tariffs were discussed. Then, like all good conversations we danced our way to the topic of identity. I explained that I am a coloured man from Paarl in South Africa. I, then, went on to clarify that I was not mixed-race as both my parents were coloured as well. With patience, I elaborated that this racial classification is still listed even in official government forms in 2025. After much shock and awe, vigorous debate and some superior moral posturing; the conversation morphed on the part of my opponent into righteous indignation. The idea that my mother, her mother's mother and the generations before them should never have been what they were became dogma to my opposition. That somehow in the mire of apartheid and its colonial parent state, I had become indoctrinated to associate myself with this term- and I was setting both myself and all other Africans back by continuing to associate with it.

And it was the indignation and protest that offended me and caused this very essay. It is an odd experience to be reduced to someone else's interpretation of your identity, let alone be told your identity is wrong. A stereotype functions on the social idea that a group will likely demonstrate a certain negative trait. This however, was not a reduction or minimization of my identity to hyper-sensationalized trope or caricature. Rather, this was a historically informed rebuff of who I am. In the eyes of this American, my existence, the word that I wove into everything from legal documents to the area I lived in-was fundamentally wrong.

And the more I reflected on the idea that my existence can be wrong to someone else; the more I dug my heels in. (Context is key like a dark humour joke told to a conservative audience, environments and circumstances matter). Colonialism makes different people of us all, and the interpretation and re-imagination of my forefather's identity and its proud reclaiming should not casually be dismissed. A culture, heritage, and yes, a racial group should not be so flippantly disregarded because it offends the sensibilities of others. Under dire economic, social and political deprivation that word amalgamated the community I proudly represent to this day.

From this Grecian style debate, one fundamental lesson does stand out-the white supremacist project of the 20th century was successful. In 2025, two people descended from Africa can meet and still arbitrate over the classifications of colonial and apartheid powers. In a way it is a marvel, racial classification has anthropologically and biologically been deemed null, yet two people can still clash over it. The world seems instinctively divided along its lines, and wealth and power seem to keep chugging along those very same tracks. The very notion that I was coloured was deemed an impossibility, rather than admitting that the colonial legacy has created different interpretations of identity. It is almost a David Blaine-level feat of endurance that a coloured person still must argue who they are in 2025. At its core, my identity is mine, South African history is its own and to disregard an entire people is the very work of the white supremacist agenda. If the irony was even a little richer, I am sure it would be exported by a multinational mining corporation for millions in profit, while the two of us remained arguing.

All in all, where there are people there will be conflict it seems. It was that determined indignation and protest that sent me down this writing road. In a way, it clearly demonstrated that even people with the best intentions and liberal social leanings can be victims of their own circumstances. At its core, the project of colonialism globally aimed to erase indigenous people, their identity and beliefs. The anti-colonial and decolonial efforts are centred on the rediscovery of indigenous knowledge, practices and beliefs. The idea is to highlight and champion diversity and not shove it away at the first sign of disagreement.