

African-ness is dynamic and ever-changing

By SANDILE MEMELA

Having read Bennie Bunsee's "Keeping African values despite rush for modernity" (Cape Argus, 27 March), it took me only a short time to realise how impossible it is to define what an African is today. The writer may think it is a social concept frozen in time, but every time I have tried to tack on to what he defines as an African I felt that he was losing me.

I have lived for over 40 years in a black African township and I am not actually sure I know what being an African means. Not fully.

What Bunsee is trying to do is literally impossible. But he is a man with intellectual tenacity and thus does not quit.

Some of us so-called Africans have a lot of misgivings about what he has to say. However, it is welcome that he pushes the limits of the debate started by President Thabo Mbeki in 1999 when he said some thought-provoking things in his "I am an African" speech which everybody is trying to understand to this day.

There is no doubt it was a watershed. Mbeki really got us thinking hard, especially those who consider themselves Africans.

When Bunsee tells us what an African is, he literally talks about what was happening in the southern tip of the continent before the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. But that is a long time ago and nobody can really relate to the time he is referring to. In the 21st century nobody should offer a view of Africanness in this way.

Being my father's son, born and bred in the concrete jungle of Johannesburg, I cannot allow anyone to present an idea of an African that is cast in stone.

What Bunsee has to say is more like a reminder to take note of. We have to recognise the cosmopolitan nature of our experience without feeling less African.

You cannot put former exiles like Mbeki or our Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr Zallo Jordan, into Bunsee's monotonous and predictable box of what an African is. In fact, he does not spare Africans like these: "The black intelligentsia has been fully integrated into Eurocentric culture, standards and norms. They are in fact 'white' themselves ... There is nothing African in their outlook."

I find that I do not agree with Bunsee. There is still a lot to talk about to get to what it means to be an African in 2007. This is not Franz Fanon or Steve Biko's 1960s.

I would want Bunsee to make me walk away with something convincing, anything that I can grasp to make me feel African and cosmopolitan at the same time. It's a subtle point but we need to come back to it and hear it repeatedly. Being African is not static. It is part of the global human experience that

evolves with the times.

We have to move away from intellectuals who want to prescribe what being an African is or means. Perhaps it is something that cannot be put into words, that cannot be grasped, that cannot be explained. Maybe it can only be pointed out when someone is dead, where people can look back at their lives and say, "Here lies a son or daughter of the soil who loved his continent and its people."

Of course, all of us can recognise an African - irrespective of colour, station in life, career or political creed - when we see one.

If you think after more than 40 years of grappling with this issue I am wasting time, you are wrong.

The problem is, we try to take hold of things, especially people's identity, and put them into boxes. And as long as we do, we will miss the point of what Mbeki defined as an African in his seminal speech.

We have to open our eyes to see what the president was pointing to - that being an African is cosmopolitan, all-embracing, dynamic, ever-changing, in transition.

The easiest thing is to look at somebody's skin colour, the shape of their nose or texture of their hair and decide whether they are African or not. Bunsee comes from an era where politics boxed up the world in the mind, a time when it was insisted that you were either black or white, PAC or ANC. In today's world, that over-simplification is ridiculous.

Many self-appointed prophets of Africanness magnanimously think they know what it is to be African. Much as they are free to pontificate, our reality is in a state of change and transformation.

We need to stop looking for a particular thing - be it so-called symbolic culture, language, rites, rituals, customs and ethos - to define what Africanness means. These elements are only part of a whole. We simply cannot find the wholeness of Africanness in some of its parts.

Some township urbanites may tell you it is African to go to Mzoli to eat braaied meat and pap and drink a lot. Thus if you are so-called African and would take a drive to Chapman's Peak just to think and marvel at the beauty, you are Europeanised or "too white".

Much as it is good to debate what being an African means, maybe there is no point to the exercise. Our ultimate failing is to believe that we know. It takes away our freedom to just be - African.

We must stop being prescriptive about Africa, especially in pre-1652 mode. We have to stop looking for what qualifies us to be Africans and just enjoy Africa. Our closeness to Africa will make us African. Or *kanjani* - what do you think?

● Sandile Memela is spokesman for the Department of Arts and Culture. He writes in his personal capacity.

