

Afrikaner Fragmentation

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1. Introduction

“After 1939, and especially during the late 1940s and 1950s, Afrikaners were united in a single entity that had become almost organic in nature” (Giliomee, 1992:343, translated from Afrikaans). With the National Party’s unexpected political victory in the 1948 election, the organic nature of the Afrikaner people began to fragment from within. Afrikanerdom, which had presented itself as an ethnonationalist group that was culturally, and later politically and economically, exclusive in nature, began to disintegrate as a result of several factors. The economic, political, and cultural factors contributing to the fragmentation of Afrikanerdom are discussed in this essay.

Post-Second World War economic development led to a series of socio-economic changes in South Africa that gradually transformed the Afrikaner into a consumer, exchanging volk culture for consumer culture (Grundlingh, 2008:146). These economic changes also gave rise to class consciousness, further dividing the supposedly unified volk (Charney, 1984:269). Ideological divisions within the National Party, which was regarded as the carrier of Afrikanerdom, became another factor contributing to fragmentation, most notably the struggle between enlightened (verligte) and reactionary (verkrampte) Afrikaners (Giliomee, 1992:339). Beyond economic and political developments, criticism of Afrikanerdom and its ideology emerged through literature and music, revealing movements within the arts and youth culture that openly resisted Afrikanerdom (Grundlingh, 2004:483).

2. The Development of the Afrikaner Economy

Following Union in 1910, successive South African governments attempted to protect white South Africans from economic competition while maintaining white political dominance. This was achieved “through the systematic denial and restriction of black people’s socio-economic rights” (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:63, translated from Afrikaans). Only after the National Party’s victory in 1948 did policy implementation shift explicitly toward Afrikaner upliftment through apartheid ideology (O’Meara, 1996:368). This was particularly evident in the civil service and parastatal sectors, where Afrikaners were actively promoted. The intention was to raise Afrikaner living standards across the class spectrum (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:92).

With the National Party in power, Afrikaner leadership was able to implement comprehensive economic policies aimed at Afrikaner advancement. By controlling the state, the NP created opportunities for Afrikaners to catch up economically with English-speaking South Africans (O’Meara, 1996:368). State-driven post-war economic development provided a platform for Afrikaner-owned businesses to grow. The establishment of public corporations such as ESKOM and ISCOR, which supplied cheap electricity and steel, “played an instrumental role in economic growth” (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:92, translated from Afrikaans). These developments benefited new Afrikaner-driven enterprises in particular.

State intervention led to the creation of institutions founded by individuals who promoted themselves and others within Afrikaner networks (Charney, 1984:269). Organizations such as the Afrikaanse

Handelsinstituut and the Ekonomiese Instituut operated within the Reddingsdaadbond, described as “a Christian-national volk organisation filled with nationalist ideology” (Grundlingh, 2008:144, translated from Afrikaans). These organisations provided research and entrepreneurial support, allowing Afrikaners to participate in broader economic activity beyond agriculture (Grundlingh, 2008:146).

The scale of industrial growth and the emergence of a diversified manufacturing and financial economy were not anticipated by the National Party. Post-war industrialisation simultaneously consolidated white political supremacy and unleashed forces that threatened apartheid’s ideological blueprint (O’Meara, 1996:368). Rapid economic growth among Afrikaners led to cultural change and class division. As E.P. Thompson observed, “There is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of culture” (Thompson, cited in Grundlingh, 2008:146).

Although many Afrikaners felt that the government was moving too quickly, they were aware of the benefits derived from National Party social engineering (Blaser, 2007:85–86). Afrikaner empowerment enabled rapid advancement within the private sector. While Afrikaners had not yet achieved the same level of economic success as English South Africans, private Afrikaner ownership doubled during the first three decades of apartheid (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:78).

Eric Rosenthal notes that “most people think of the Voortrekkers as a group consisting mainly of farmers and stock breeders” (Rosenthal, 1961:52, translated from Afrikaans). The Afrikaner shifted from farmer to businessman. Visitors to the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria no longer looked only over the Transvaal plains but also over skyscrapers and towers owned by Afrikaners, symbolising a capitalist playground for the affluent Afrikaner (Grundlingh, 2008:146).

2.1 Consumers Replace the Volk

The Afrikaner’s newly acquired economic identity played a prominent role in the decline of Afrikanerdom. One consequence of rapid economic advancement was the adoption of consumer culture. Modern commerce, according to Slater, dissolves social bonds and values, replacing them with material self-interest and economic calculation (Slater, cited in Grundlingh, 2008:146).

Grundlingh describes the “economic prosperity and growth of consumer culture” among Afrikaners during the 1960s (Grundlingh, 2008:146). This period marked a shift from “saving for stability” to “spending for success” (Grundlingh, 2008:144, translated from Afrikaans). Afrikaners became willing participants in emerging consumer patterns (Grundlingh, 2008:146).

Modernisation theory, dominant during the 1960s and 1970s, argued that ethnic identity would become subordinate to class interests. Once ethnic mobility was achieved, primordial identification became dysfunctional and was replaced by class-based identity (Stone, 2004:116). Within this framework, a general consumer culture replaced outdated ethnic identities. Observing Afrikaner socio-economic transformation, it becomes clear that consumer culture eclipsed Afrikanerdom. W.J. de Klerk warned that “prosperity, whether on a grand scale or through small windfalls, can pose a serious threat to the individual, the family and the volk” (De Klerk, 1968:18, translated from Afrikaans).

2.2 Status and Symbols of Wealth

Advertisements in *Huisgenoot*, a prominent Afrikaner family magazine, clearly illustrate Afrikaner transformation into consumers. An OK advertisement from 1971 stated: “You do not have to be rich to feel rich” and “Feel rich. Pay less” (*Huisgenoot*, 15 October 1971:15, translated from Afrikaans).

Consumer goods such as cars, clothing, and electronic devices became central to Afrikaner society, replacing symbols of Christian nationalism.

A 1968 Datsun advertisement proclaimed “taste the pleasure of luxury” (*Huisgenoot*, 26 July 1968:92, translated from Afrikaans). Afrikaners increasingly travelled abroad, facilitated by South African Airways’ “fly now, pay later” scheme (*Huisgenoot*, 8 October 1971:94, translated from Afrikaans). This allowed Afrikaners to experience “the luxuries of Spain” while paying over three years (*Huisgenoot*, 15 October 1971:65). As de Klerk warned, these luxuries threatened Afrikaner cohesion and contributed to fragmentation (De Klerk, 1968:18).

2.3 The Upper Town and the Lower Town

The capitalist nature of Afrikaner economic activity fostered class consciousness (Charney, 1984:269). While affluent Afrikaners displayed luxury, others were marginalised. A stereotype of the working-class Afrikaner emerged, encapsulated in the phrase “one-litre brandy, two-litre Coke and three-litre Ford” (Grundlingh, 2008:150).

The new Afrikaner bourgeoisie exhibited snobbery toward less affluent Afrikaners. Although they did not necessarily intend harm, bourgeois status increasingly outweighed ethnic solidarity (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:87). By the 1970s, the ideal of a classless volk had collapsed. Middle-class elites found little incentive to protect poorer ethnic kin, prioritising capitalist accumulation, even if this undermined white working-class interests (Du Toit, 1981:154).

By the 1980s, class divisions were firmly established, coinciding with the National Party’s evolution into a party dominated by the Afrikaner bourgeoisie (Giliomee, 1992:348).

3. The “Broedertwis”

After 1948, Afrikaner politicisation transformed Afrikaners into a Western people on African soil, rapidly modernising and expanding political choice (Giliomee, 1992:339). Afrikanerdom entered the 1960s as a cohesive political unit, comfortable within the state and at the height of its power (Giliomee, 1992:343). Political unity, economic prosperity and cultural chauvinism enabled Hendrik Verwoerd to portray Afrikaners as a unified, classless democracy (Giliomee, 1992:343).

Verwoerd’s assassination marked the beginning of ideological collapse. Without the architect of “separate but equal” utopianism, the vision that bound Afrikanerdom disintegrated (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:87). The verlig/verkramp debate emerged, leading to the suspension of prominent reactionaries under Albert Hertzog and the formation of the Herstigte Nasionale Party (Giliomee, 1992:343).

Reactionary Afrikaners resisted change and upheld traditional hierarchies, while the enlightened faction favoured pragmatism and compromise (Giliomee, 1992:340). Reactionaries represented agricultural interests, whereas the enlightened faction aligned with industrial capital and international economic integration (Charney, 1984:269). Enlightened Afrikaners recognised the need to raise black wages and stabilise labour to increase productivity (Du Toit, 1981:154).

The Conservative Party’s formation in 1982 reduced National Party support from 80 percent to 60 percent of the Afrikaner vote (Giliomee, 1992:352). This split reflected divergent survival strategies rather than mere class conflict (Van der Westhuizen, 2007:78).

F.W. de Klerk later argued that apartheid's fundamental flaw was its impracticality, stating that "if one believes a policy is unworkable, it becomes immoral to advocate it" (Waldmeir, 1997:22). Waldmeir summarised this logic as a sequence of pragmatic necessity rather than ideological conversion (Waldmeir, 1997:116).

The National Party's decision to negotiate with the ANC was perceived as betrayal by conservative Afrikaners (Giliomee, 1992:343). While the 1994 democratic election brought freedom to South Africans, it marked the fragmentation of Afrikanerdom.

4. Protest Against Apartheid

Two major movements articulated internal Afrikaner criticism between 1960 and 1994: the Sestigers and the Voëlvry movement. Both challenged apartheid ideology and the moral foundations of Afrikanerdom (Grundlingh, 2004:483).

4.1 The Sestigers

The Sestigers employed modern literary techniques to explore modernity, secularisation and sexual freedom (Blaser, 2007:87). These writers redefined Afrikaner identity, criticising authoritarianism and materialism (Blaser, 2007:88). Earlier Afrikaans novels portrayed decisive male heroes, whereas newer works featured alienated, introspective characters struggling with social complexity (Blaser, 2007:87).

4.2 Social Protest in the 1980s

Afrikaner nationalism failed to socialise post-1960 generations into obedient volk citizens. Youth challenged apartheid's patriarchal and authoritarian structures (Grundlingh, 2004:485). Guilt among middle-aged Afrikaners transformed into outright rejection by their children (Grundlingh, 2004:483).

The Voëlvry movement provided a platform for alternative Afrikaner identity through musicians such as Koos Kombuis and Johannes Kerkorrel. Touring South Africa in 1989, the so-called "Gereformeerde Blues Band" generated enthusiasm described as "Boer Beatlemania" (Grundlingh, 2004:485).

5. Conclusion

Afrikaner fragmentation between 1960 and 1994 was a gradual process driven by economic growth, consumerism, class division, ideological conflict and cultural protest. The once-classless volk fractured socially and politically. Ideological divisions culminated in the collapse of the National Party as the carrier of Afrikanerdom. Apartheid, once its cornerstone, came to be viewed as morally and pragmatically untenable. The 1994 transfer of power marked the end of a unified Afrikaner identity and the final fragmentation of volk and fatherland.

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