

THE ZIMBABWEAN

ISSN 1026-2105

REVIEW

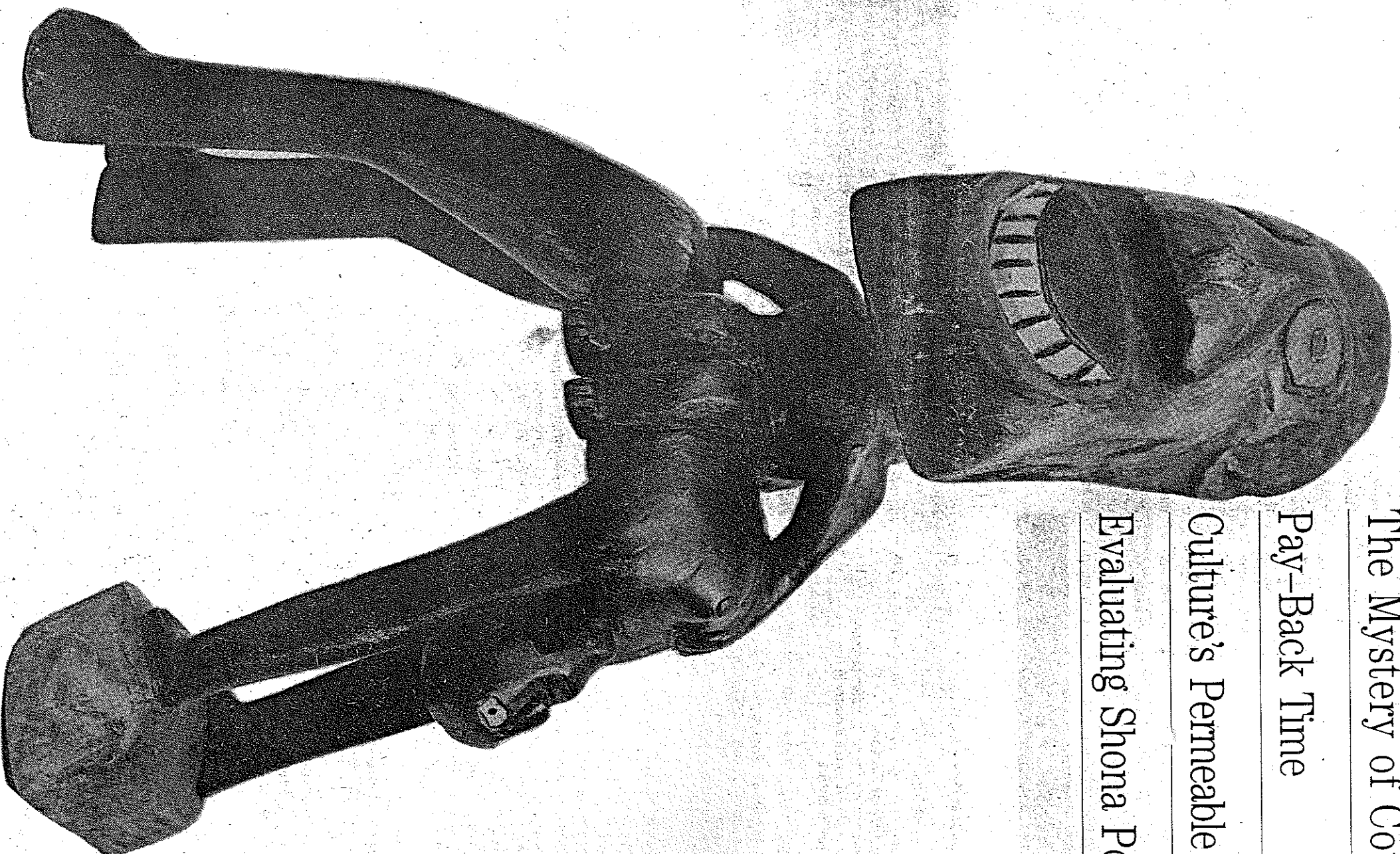
Vol 3 No. 4 October-December 1997

The Mystery of Cotton

Pay-Back Time

Culture's Permeable Frontiers

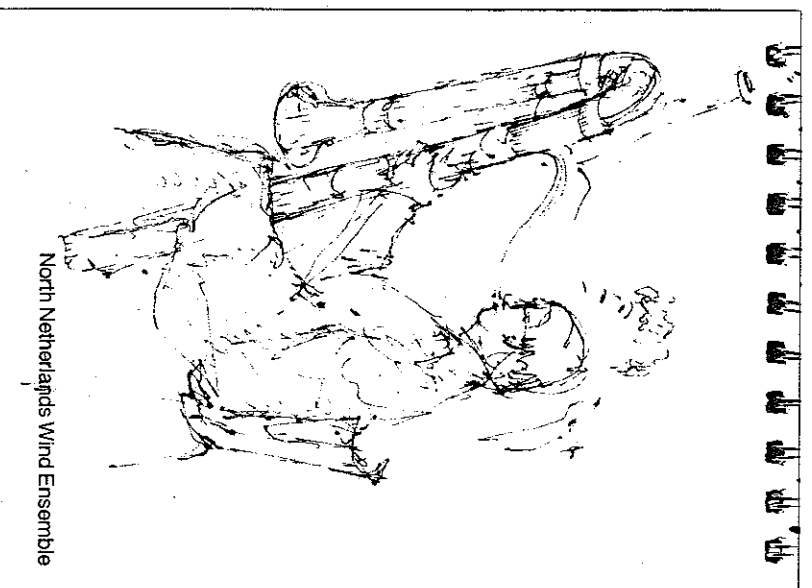
Evaluating Shona Poetry



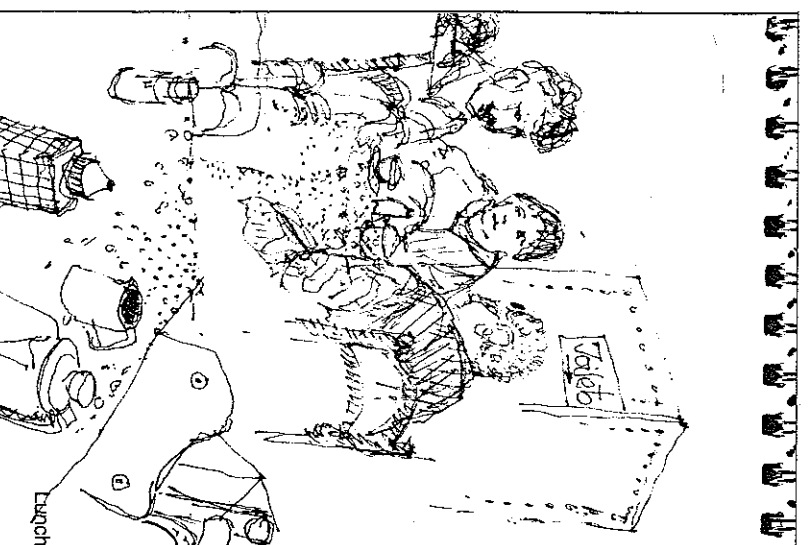
S. Tendani



Waiting for the show



North Netherlands Wind Ensemble



Lunch

curtains of rope. The story was treated as a banal fairy-tale where goodies and baddies play out their predictably wooden parts. We all know that singers are still not trained to act. But where was the spectacle?

THE POINT OF INTERPRETATION

However worthwhile the singing (and we were enchanted by this, particularly Papageno – Raphael Viakazi and Tamino – Borgani Tembe) as theatre and thus as opera the transformation was not a success. Why set an eighteenth-century Austrian opera in pastoral Africa? Surely the point of a new interpretation is to renew the immediacy, power and dramatic tension of the original by making it seem relevant, fresh and unpredictable. A new perspective should give us a new insight. The directors would have been advised to take as their exemplar the recent magical film production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Baz Luhrmann sets the action

in a Verona located in contemporary Mexico, half-fantasy, half-real and relies on visual images and puns rather than Shakespeare's words to create tension, poetry and drama. Every tiny detail of the reinterpretation moves, starting with the camp silver heels of Tybalt as he grinds out his cigarette at the petrol station, because this is not cheap and superficial gimmickry but aims at the truth. Neither *The Magic Flute* nor *Madame de Sade* aimed at theatrical truth, which makes me wonder whether the directors clearly understand the nature of theatre.

Whatever the theatre is about, it is not a kind of cultural church that we go to because it shows how cultivated (and also, by extension, how *good* and *clever*) we are. People should be sucked into the theatre because what they get there is more exciting, more moving, more dramatic, funnier, more tragic, than what they can get anywhere else. While the cinema has the advantage of mas-

sive size and scale of theatrical performance, the theatre can offer the stunning power of the live human presence where, at any moment, as in the circus, you anticipate being touched and moved. Explain it thus: could Hitler have moved his masses by using nothing but television? Wasn't his physical presence and the presence of his massive audience necessary to create the magic of the demagogue?

In at least these two performances we saw White South Africans struggling through metaphors to express the complexity of their multicultural society and failing because they cannot bear to, or have not yet learned how to, look at it directly, gravely, with sincerity and attention through the medium of the theatre. In this respect they are in precisely the same situation as the directors of mainstream theatre at home. ▶

MULTICULTURALISM

Culture's Permeable Frontiers

SHAWKAT M TOORAWA LOOKS AT MULTICULTURALISM IN MAURITIUS

"No one today is purely one thing"
(Edward Said)

"The frontiers are there, the frontiers are sacred. What else, after all, could guarantee privilege and power to the ruling elites?"
(Basil Davidson)

Mauritius, an island of 2041 square kilometers in the south west Indian Ocean, was uninhabited when the Dutch built a garrison there in the 17th century. They abandoned Mauritius, favouring the Cape as a base of Indian Ocean operations, and the French then occupied the island in 1721. They called it Isle de

France, transforming it into their own strategic Indian Ocean possession and introducing slaves from Africa as labourers for the sugar estates, and Free Coloureds from India as artisans who were neither slaves nor indentured labourers but also not first-class citizens.

Anglo-French rivalry in the late 18th century, especially in and over India, made it clear that the loss of Mauritius would mean the loss of India for the French. In spite of the only French naval victory over the British at Ile de la Passe in the south east of Mauritius, in 1810 General Decaen was forced to capitulate to the superior British military force that was later sent to take Mauritius.

Decaen secured several guarantees that forever influenced the constitution of a Mauritian identity and culture. The most far-reaching of these were the preservation of the French language and the continued presence of the Catholic church. To this day the influence of English is minimal – until 1996, the only major daily newspapers published in French. Indeed, the British legacy in Mauritius was the subject of a conference held at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in April of this year. This very same Institute, one of the Republic of Mauritius's four tertiary institutions, held a conference in November 1996 entitled "Towards the Making of a Multicultural Society".

One enduring legacy of the British was the importation of indentured labour from India as a counter-measure to the drop in the workforce after the abolition of slavery. What had in the 17th

performance in the so-called "oriental languages" such as Arabic, Hindi, Tamil and Urdu in the ranking of students who elect to take these languages in addition to the four basic subjects has given rise

panel of the conference, "Philosophical and theoretical reflections," comprising Puri (Mahatma Gandhi Institute), Lionnet (Northwestern University), Dewarain (Mahatma Gandhi Institute), and myself (University of Mauritius).

Most cultural historians have failed to take note of what Said calls "geographical notation and the theoretical mapping and charting of territory"

century been a Dutch garrison of 30 or so men and in the 18th century a French entrepôt and military and privateer station of a few thousand colonists and several thousand slaves, in the course of the 19th century developed into a thriving sugar colony with a growing population. Mauritius, which became independent of the United Kingdom in 1968, is now a country of roughly 1.1 million people in which citizens of Indian origin (Indo-Mauritians) account for 68 per cent of the population. Another 28 per cent, called the "general population" (Creole), are of mixed ancestry, mainly European and African. Sino-Mauritians account for 3 per cent and the Franco-Mauritians, still economically powerful (nine of the top ten companies are in their hands, as are all the sugar estates), comprise 1 per cent. Approximately 52 per cent of the island is Hindu, 17 per cent Muslim and 30 per cent Catholic.

Complicating the picture is the fact that many people are many things and either cannot or do not wish to be identified with any one group. Alignment, voluntary or involuntary (that is, assigned) of religious, ethnic and indeed linguistic and political groups has led to a "communalizing" of issues, that is, imputing race and ethnicity-based motives to individuals and initiatives. "Communalism" is often blamed for problems that have nothing to do with it; promotions are attributed to it, even in clearly meritocratic situations. Children grow up with it in their schools and homes and those trying to operate outside it are more often than not burdened by its insistent presence and the baggage it brings.

Recent events and controversies have underscored the need for change. These include the rise of religious political parties and the clean-sweep election of a new government with no opposition. Mauritian governments continue to use a debatable mechanism which "elects" four best-loser candidates to parliament. In this system if the 60 elected MPs do not adequately represent the communal composition of the country, then up to four candidates are selected (according to a complicated formula) and invited into parliament.

Languages also present problems. Children in Mauritius sit an exam equivalent to Zimbabwe's Grade 7 exam which forms the basis of selection to secondary schools. The possible inclusion of

to acrimonious debate.

These features of Mauritian society, together with the supposed communalism and casteism of appointments and nominations in many of the country's institutions – and intermittent expressions of public unrest – underscored the timeliness of the initiative on the part of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute to hold a conference on the subject of multiculturalism. By inviting foreign specialists Mauritians were able to hear at first hand the views of academics, policy makers and intellectuals about multiculturalism in their respective environments. The conference also allowed the Mauritian participants to take the bull by the horns, as it were. The thorny issue of "*malaise créole*" for instance, was addressed by university historians Sada Reddi and Jocely Chan Low. "*Malaise créole*" is a term used by the media and academics to describe uneasiness felt in the Creole community about certain phenomena which outsiders stereotypically feel are endemic to it, such as low performance in schools, crime and social problems.

The Mahatma Gandhi Institute's Sookhoo critiqued the best-loser system. Perhaps no-one confronted the importance of the conference and the issues facing a multicultural society better than his excellency Cassam Ujeen, president of Mauritius, in a direct opening address, unburdened by nicety and euphemism. William Smith of Northeastern University in Boston, a 1996/97 Fulbright Researcher attached to the University of Mauritius, more than once warned the gathering about the possible and undesirable hegemony

Belief in images brought from a fictionalized, romantic past is dangerous

of a multiculturalism that is supposed to liberate not oppress.

Indeed, reified categories and the need for critical circumspection was addressed in the opening

MAPPING COMMUNITIES THEIR CULTURAL TERRITORIES

Although the wording of the title of this reflection is inspired by Alfred Korzybski's observation, "The map is not the territory", it is rather the pertinent intersection of this remark with the attention critics have given to cartography, for example Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, that occasions it. Said writes specifically that most cultural historians have failed to take note of what he calls "geographical notation and the theoretical mapping and charting of territory". If I have proposed a cartographic metaphor, my intention has been simultaneously to erect and to undermine the territory and its map, to deform, or re-form the domain of the community and of groups by stressing ties of affinity, sympathy and compassion. Said laments that in the new post-colonial international configuration, newly triumphant politicians, along with other authorized figures, rulers, national heroes and martyrs and established religious authorities, always seem to require borders. As he says,

What had once been the imaginative liberation of a people (Aimé Césaire's *Inventions of New Souls*) and the audacious metaphorical charting of spiritual territory usurped by colonial masters, were quickly translated into and accommodated by a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers.

It seems to me useful, even imperative, to start to recognize, with Said, that when "the logic of borders" dominates and pervades discourse it makes everything within seem homogeneous and opposed to everything outside. Confictual, oppositional, territorial, warring essences are also totalizing: we must recognize instead that the map of the world or of the nation or of the community "has no divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences, or privileges". We must move away from a need to perpetuate fiefdoms, guilds and manipulative identities (like India, Africa, Islam) and concern ourselves with "the improvement and non-coercive enhancement of life in a community struggling to exist among other communities".

CULTURES AND CULTURAL PROPERTY

Cultures and communities eventually come to be associated aggressively with the cultural property that differentiates "us" from "them", and the entailing associated exclusions. Cultures and communities thus become combative sources of identity, occasioning "returns" to culture and tradition, "returns" that accompany rigorous codes of behaviour, that are opposed to the perceived permissiveness of relatively liberal philosophies like multiculturalism and hybridity, and that can produce religious and nationalist fundamentalisms. I can only share Said's uneasiness about the mobilizing power of images brought forth from a

fictionalized, romantic past, one that privileges a so-called golden age, that searches for essences. This kind of belief is patently dangerous, as Said recognizes: the labilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit, negritude, or Islam are clear: they have much to do ... with the native manipulators, who ... use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, [and] tyrannies.

If I have assimilated culture and community to nation, it is not for reasons of theoretical unsophistication but rather because the issue of community is related to the issue of nation and because both are in turn related to the idea of boundaries, borders and frontiers. In an island, the boundaries, territorial at any rate, appear predetermined. In this connection, Gillian Beer has pointed out that "the concept of nationhood which relies upon the cultural idea of the island" is no longer tenable. We might invert that proposition and say that the concept of an island which relies upon the concept of nationhood, equally, is tenable only with difficulty.

Rejecting the impermeability or unviability of an island's borders is not so very radical. Indeed, islands with a constitutive history of immigration, such as the case of Mauritius, undermine, or at least problematize, the entire notion of insularity. Immigrants and their descendants are eventually absorbed into the national culture. The attendant "loss of one's past ... autobiography, history, heritage, language" results in a melting pot which, under the circumstances, is either a 'necessary' myth or an 'enabling' metaphor.

It is perhaps obvious but bears repeating in a Mauritanian context that can seem so very removed from subcontinental, European and other experiences, that the lines between communities and ethnicities, are blurred at best; that these categories, like cultures, are to a great extent: humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote.

That cultural, community, group experiences are not pure, essential, but: oddly hybrid ... partak[ing] of many often-contradictory experiences and domains, cross[ing] national boundaries, defying[ing] the police action of simple dogma.

There is a dangerous tendency to see culture as something that you own. But, as Said has put it very simply, "Culture is never just a matter of ownership." Cultures are not impermeable and their boundaries are fluid at best.

CONTAGION

I want to introduce another metaphor, that of contagion. James Snead has discussed contagion in the context of Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo-Jumbo*. I invoke his remarks here as I find them apropos. He writes:

Perhaps the most important aspect of cultural contagion is that by the time one is aware of it, it has already happened. Contagion, being metonymic ... involves ... an actual process of contacts between people, rather than a quantitative setting of metaphorical value ... Opposed to Dr Johnson's 'pedigree' that sought to discover lost, but recoverable differences, contagion represents the existence of recoverable affinities between disparate races of people.... Even as collection domesticates and organizes barriers and distances, contagion seems to have already made obsolete the barriers to its own spread.

Snead, who is concerned with African and African-American writers in the article from which this quotation is taken, goes on to criticise Africanists who compress variety into identity. He believes that this turns critics and observers into racists, nationalists or individualists. Racists pur-

Snead criticizes Africanists who compress variety into identity

vey unproblematised compressed identities such as *afrikanité* – in our situation this might perhaps be said about *crétolité* or Indianness – wherein a Black, African writer's work is obliged to be "an expression of negritude, a verbal manifestation of a particular soul". And the preoccupation of nationalists is with "mapping the geography of ... literature, a literature conveniently contained within ... arbitrary territorial boundaries". Snead draws on the cartographic metaphor and calls these and other projections "flattened perspectives".

Indeed, cartography becomes less and less useful as we come to the realization that the space occupied by communities is one possessed of transgressive boundaries, is neutral, is an irredeemably plural modern one, signifies and perhaps most importantly, is, a space that must be shared, that necessitates overlap and affinity.

Among the many questions we must ask, I would like to propose two. The first echoes Françoise Lionnet: What are the preconditions under which the formulations of identity and difference do not risk becoming static categories used to polarize and fragment communities? The second adapts both Roger Toumson and Françoise Lionnet:

In view of the fact that ... a system of thought that represents the 'other' as a variation of the 'same' cannot do justice to a multicultural environment, what ... concept of difference can bear witness to cultural particularity without ... dependence on, colonial, imperial, or foundational

models?" It is important to remember that representing the 'other' as a variant of 'the same' or even of "the self" is to interpret with a set of preconceived categories and labels in mind. The burden on us all is to accept the "other" as "other" and not as some kind of obverse or perversive of ourselves.

MINORITY CULTURES

I conclude with observations that derive from the fact that I am part of a Muslim minority, something I have been everywhere I have ever lived. In so being, needless to stress, a fair amount of accommodation to majority demands is required. As Syed Abedin writes,

within the framework of the unquestioned primacy of our allegiance to Islam, we [Muslims] need to determine what should be our proper attitude towards this social reality. We need to ... see how some of the political and social effects of this stance can be softened and mitigated, and learn to live with those that cannot.

The struggle is to face conflicting needs. On the one hand, to encourage Muslim communities to strengthen and reinforce their cultural identity in a multicultural society so that they may not be absorbed and assimilated. On the other hand somehow to make the same group realize that physical traits, cultural traditions, dress, food, customs and habits are subordinate or subsidiary to their main identity, that true identity is determined by the manner in which an individual or a community (and by extension the community too) uses her faculties and selects ends and means as she approaches the business of living. True identity, then, is not simply a cultural construct, nor is it acultural. It is a complexity of cultural, practical and interpretive values, a realization that one is not tribal, racial or communal but a participant.

When we accept configurations of overlap and interdependence and when we accept that communities are and can be founded "not on a specific difference or a shared essence" but on a shared power of choice, of incompatible, although correlated, choices," then, and only then, can history and geography be transfigured in new maps; can the exilic, migratory experience of "crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of canonic enclosures" become truly enabling and can humanity, complicated, plural, humanity – unburdened by territorial, exclusionary and proprietary impulses – build the multicultural societies of which we are in such pressing need.

A version of this article, entitled "Mapping Communities and their Cultural Territories", was presented at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute's conference "Towards the Making of a Multicultural Society" in 1996. ▲