

Nog Altyd Hier Gewees: Die Storie van 'n Stellenbosse Gemeenskap
(Tafelberg, 2007)

Hermann Giliomee

Cornelius Thomas*
Director, National Heritage
and Cultural Studies Centre
University of Fort Hare

Hermann Giliomee's *Nog Altyd Hier Gewees* (2007) offers an excellent prototype of the fusion of community and political history. Apart from arguing that Coloured people (or *bruinmense*, to use the author's term) participated creatively in the making of Stellenbosch and later in forging a community eventually set or cast apart, Giliomee does not follow a particular ideological or "school" thesis. He goes right down the middle, purely on the basis of evidence, and constructs a fresh narrative that affords Stellenbosch Coloureds a nuanced place in history, and well as subjects.

While Giliomee offers a fresh community history, often from the perspective of the Coloureds or brown people (*bruinmense*) of Stellenbosch, he largely follows the paradigm and trajectory of South Africa's colonial (1652-1910), union (1910-1961), and republican history (1961-). In giving the Coloured people of Stellenbosch a voice, Giliomee breaks new ground. Clergy, educators, and community leaders come to the fore to play a role as subjects in the shaping of Stellenbosch society. Like the halfway house hamlet called Kuilsrivier, and for this see AL Vermaak's MA thesis (1994), the text shows how Coloured people for a while before and immediately post the emancipation of the slaves in 1838 responded positively to mission work and mission-based education, nudging themselves closer to citizenship. *Nog Altyd* however does not assert that Stellenbosch's Coloured community had always

* Send all Book Review contributions that fit into New Contree's thematic specialization, either through the journal or directly to Dr. Cornelius Thomas, NAHECS, University of Fort Hare, Private Bag X1314, Alice 5700 OR e-mail: cthomas@ufh.ac.za.

been here (there) as Coloureds or *bruinmense*. It shows instead that Coloured people participated positively and hopefully in a society in search of itself, and this amid questions about citizenship and slavery, Christianity and paganism, literacy and illiteracy, wealth and poverty, and colour too.

Always the church was there as an incubator and nursery of culture and progress; always the people of colour embraced it and its spinoffs. After the mid-19th century, with the interventions of the liberal “state” bringing about the Cape liberal tradition of equal rights for all civilized men, and later segregationist and apartheid states, when we get an emphasis on politics, the church seemingly or virtually disappeared (so the paradigm apparently implies), but Giliomee assigns credit to the church and the clergy throughout, bringing to the fore a people whose being and activism were based on morality and ethics.

As the text lays bare the multi-textured tapestry, one sees separations being made between “European” and “non-European”, between white and brown in Stellenbosch, one is reminded of Noel Ignatiev’s treatise, *How the Irish Became White*. Ignatiev unfolds complex processes of “racialising” and racial distancing wherein the Irish become white like the Anglo-Saxon Protestants of America. Dutch settlers and other Euro-migrants again gradually became white while the miscellaneous offspring of the Cape melting pot came to be differently defined until “the Coloureds” started emerging. In the Cape (including Stellenbosch) Dutch company workers, servants, settlers and free burghers found that the rights, protections and land afforded them by the company as well as their technological advantage over the indigenes (Khoi-Khoin, San) and slaves placed them in a position of power. So insofar as Stellenbosch’s *bruinmense* could be associated with the indigenes and slaves, and the more they were technologically and educationally backward, they were gradually classed in a category apart from the “citizens” of Dutch (Euro-)descent. The civilized (read literate and propertied) Coloureds, though, insisted on and retained rights. And this is especially where Giliomee acknowledges the entwined nature of Stellenbosch’s genesis, growth and being. This being part of Stellenbosch from its birth was of course not only functional and economically reciprocal, but also genetic. And so the *bruinmense* of this town spanned the spectrum from Nordic pale to African dark. In other words, separations could not always be made, this as late as the early 1960s. Giliomee further shows that leveling took place, especially in the 19th century and that social and racial distancing was not always the trend or a reality in Stellenbosch (Cape) society. With all

this going on, Giliomee finds time to take the reader on a tour of Coloured Stellenbosch (102-113), a visual reflection from which social historians can learn a lot.

Giliomee visits the more criminal side of white-brown relations, especially in the labour arena where the tot system (*dopstelsel*) wreaked havoc. The sub-theme of “from slaves to drug slaves”, I should like to think, is also implicit in the book. Then there is also the criminality in the white riot that rocked brown Stellenbosch in the 1940s. It makes for suspenseful and provocative reading, and I see in it the fear of difference, the jealousies generated by upward movement of “the other”, the belief in inequality, and arrogance of white supremacy and white racism. In unpacking the riot on Andringa Street, Giliomee slips in not addressing the oft-repeated claim, historically, that “we white men did it to protect our women”. The histories of slavery in the South of the United States and the black working class in the industrial north of that country are replete with examples of white riots which supposedly erupted to protect “white womanhood”. These justifications have been proven fraudulent. Finally, a chapter on the crime of forced removals greatly enhances and nuances our District Six-Sophiatown literature. My own *Dust in My Coffee – A Family Called North End* (2008) – on the District Six of East London – also adds to the literature on forced removals and shows, like Giliomee’s chapter, the magnitude and drawn out trauma this odious policy and practice brought about all over South Africa.

Thus, insofar as Coloureds were part and parcel of the evolution of Stellenbosch, Giliomee had little choice but to unfold their story too within the colonial-union-republican paradigm and along the time-line of white politics. In other words, socially speaking Coloureds participated in white society, albeit marginally so, practicing a variant of European culture, and they played a significant role in the political dispensation. One might be apt to ask, “What’s new?” Giliomee debunks every myth fundamentalists, essentialists, politically correctists held and may hold about Coloured people: that Coloureds form(ed) a homogenous group, that they always sided with the white man, that they benefited from apartheid (they benefited from Prime Minister JBM Hertzog’s social engineering – read civilized labour policy – and only lost ground under apartheid); that they did not challenge white supremacy, that they did not fight for freedom.

Of exciting interest should be the “debates” between the pro-Afrikaner John Tobin’s sons of the soil solidarity politics and the comprehensive all civilized

men (including Africans) politics of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman. Thought-provoking is the “stand-off” between Abdurahman and Hertzog. And revealing also is the activism of the 1970s and 80s. Referring to the observation “that they did not fight for freedom”, though, I wonder to what extent Giliomee could have delved to find other sources of self-empowerment, of energy. Yes, the church (a European institution) stood sturdily in the centre of Coloured culture, and so too education. But what beyond that? In sports the Coloureds of Cape Town and Stellenbosch made their own separations by forming Coloured clubs and associations and playing in inter-race tournaments (against Bantu and Indian teams). What about popular cultural expressions – contributing to a new language (Afrikaans) and patois variants thereof which are useful only to township Coloured people; distinctive dance styles from the quadrille through *langarm* to “die bus” (the bus); and what of the Coloured elite who embraced Victorianism – one could call them brown Victorians – and English liberalism, and Cape jazz. Then the politics outside of Cape electoral politics, especially the politics of the left, could have found space too.

Giliomee’s treatise stands as an achievement to be emulated for many Coloured communities around the country. It offers a flowing narrative that transcends the compartments into which community histories are so often pressed – church, education, social pathologies, politics, sports. It tumbles forth like life, with turbulence, ugliness and beauty, and with sound and texture and colour. It is a fine achievement.