

# Coloured Son - 4

JOHAN DE LANGE

In these autobiographical notes by the illegitimate son of a former South African member of parliament are glimpses of that half-world inhabited by light-skinned "coloured" people fathered by white men, often prominent citizens. Three previous extracts dealt with the subject's childhood on a Western Cape farm and his schooldays as a "coloured", leading to his gradual, planned move over to the "white" world. The story's end is an epitome of South Africa's race-sick condition, as was its beginning.

SINCE MY WHITE FATHER had failed to reply to my letter and the letter from the personnel officer, I began to think earnestly of commencing proceedings on my own to get my white identity card.

At the end of October 1962, there appeared a long report in the newspapers on race classification. It stated clearly that there were now a few changes in the race classification system. I held my breath and started to read further. Would the new rules be against or for me?

The then population Registrar, Mr. J. J. N. Howard, issued copies of the new form used for classification. He explained their use:

"I wish to point out that the change in the system of race classification was necessitated by the judgment in the case *J. J. Otto versus the Race Classification Board in the Griqualand West Local Division of the Supreme Court on 9th August, 1962.*"

In his judgment Mr. Justice de Vos Hugo pointed out that any person claiming classification as a member of the white group on the grounds that he is accepted as a white person, must have severed his association with the Coloured community and it must be evident that he has, after a transitory period which must have terminated, established himself in the white group.

Under the previous system, the person applying for classification had to provide affidavits from three people of high standing—such as a police officer, minister of religion, member of parliament, senator, or a member of the provincial council—and two from family friends willing to swear that he was accepted as a white person.

This system was being criticised because it was acutely embarrassing to approach friends and officials for affidavits on one's colour.

Under the new law, or rather system, the person has only to fill in a questionnaire in which the names and addresses of three friends, any acquaintances of high standing, and all employers for the past five years are given. Government officials themselves approach these people and ask them to fill in strictly confidential forms, stating whether they accepted him as a "white" or "Coloured" person. The applicant is not allowed to see this form.

The report held hopes for me. Without delay I went to the Race Classification Board in Cape Town.

There were quite a number of people waiting. Later I found out that most of them came back to be reclassified as white people.

The man behind the desk was himself as brown as a berry and I could not help wondering how he could ever have passed for White. If he were to work outside he would almost become black! He must have been glad of sheltered employment.

I stated my point. My mother was not white and my father an unknown white man. I wanted to be white.

The official was very sympathetic.

"You did a very good thing not to have filled in the ordinary identity card form. You could easily have done so and I am sure you would have been issued with a white card. But there might have been repercussions. It is better that we fill in all the required forms so that you will never have any trouble again."

The dark man behind the desk looked me up and down.

"I wouldn't have thought you were not white so you will definitely get a white card. Especially since you came straight to the point. See those people you have just passed in the waiting-room? They all had something to hide and did not make a clean breast of it. It is for that reason they all had to come back for reclassification."

I was questioned about the physical appearance of my brothers and sisters. Whether they looked "white" or not. Was their hair long or short? Do I intend seeing them again and so.

"All right, my boy, don't worry you will be white soon. Fill in these forms and bring them back to me. Have two photographs taken as well." He slapped me reassuringly on the back and I left.

When outside I did not know whether I should feel relieved or depressed. I had not expected the interview to be so easy.

I went straight to my writer friend and asked him to help me fill in the various forms. He still believed that I would come back once I had gone through our experiment, but to be white and stay white was becoming an obsession

by me. After a few days I took the forms back. Then the long wait started.

OUR FACTORY BROKE UP in the middle of December for the Christmas and New Year holiday. I visited my parents at Ilgin for a week, then went to see my writer friend.

He and I were coming from a visit to my mother in his car early on New Year's Eve when we gave a few Africans a lift. I got out and opened the door for them. An elderly African could hardly believe himself and said:

"You must be a very good *baas*, because no white man ever spoke to me so decently—me a black kaffir."

"Truly," said the African again, "I did not know that a white man could be so friendly and kind to black people. I am over fifty. O my heart feels so glad to know that. Tonight, just tonight, I am going to tell as many of my people as I can about the *baas* with the good heart."

The African did not know, of course, that I was a so-called "Coloured." Out of common human respect he also addressed the writer as Master.

We were taking a short cut through a communal farm-road. Unfortunately, only a minute or so before we would have dropped the Africans, my friend took a wrong turning. He was only about ten yards off the track, near the house of a white foreman, a real racist if ever there were one. He stopped us and wanted to know what we were doing on his land. The writer explained his minor mistake and apologised. The white bully, however, was not satisfied. In South Africa the majority of white people do not like people who are not white to possess fine cars.

"I gave some of your workmen a lift," my friend said because the Africans had asked us to drop them somewhere on the same farm and we assumed that they were working there.

The white bully, dressed in shorts, looked into the car and when he failed to recognise any of the Africans he became like a mad man—a real fanatic. His eyes shot fire as he shouted:

"Where are your passes?" The poor people did not have their passes on them since they had deposited them with their employer.

When the bully discovered that they could not produce any pass, he told the writer to hang on as he wanted to telephone the police to come and arrest the black people, who are compelled by cruel law to carry a pass wherever they go.

Fortunately I knew who the Africans worked for because I saw them getting out of their employer's truck before we had picked them up. I told the racist so. Meanwhile the Africans were begging for mercy.

"Please, my *baas*, my Great King, have mercy upon us; it's New Year tomorrow," the two Africans pleaded simultaneously. "The *baas* can phone our *baas*."

"I am not your bloody King," the bully said. His wife was on the step, watching. He passed her on his way to the telephone, but before he reached it in the passage, he turned back.

"All right," he said, "you may go to your friends on this farm, but if there's any fighting

# Against Incomplete Religion

Martin Jarrett-Kerr

*Towards an Indigenous Church* by Bolaji Idowu (OUP Students' Library 5s.)

tonight, you'll regret it. I will remember your faces and names!"

We drove out into the road and the Africans got off.

"How much they must hate the white people," the writer said with a frown on his forehead as the Buick sped on. "Can you call them barbarians if they murder some white people when they get a chance?"

Earlier that year enraged and frustrated Africans killed two white people at Paarl. There had been other killings too.

Now I knew what the main cause was behind these murders and riots. It was the slave system of apartheid that gives every white man the right to treat anyone who is not white with contempt and to subject him or her to humiliation.

"Do you still want to be white?" I asked myself. I knew it meant joining the evil forces at work in South Africa; doing the things that are expected of white people here. But it was too late now. I was already a victim of the white man's bait, although I did not fully realise it then. Once the drawbridge over the colour barrier was pulled up there would be no return for me to the sufferings I had seen and often experienced.

IT WAS ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF JANUARY 1963, when I arrived at my lodgings one evening to find a bulky registered letter awaiting me. The landlady had signed for it. I started to open it nervously, not quite knowing what to expect.

Next moment I was looking at my photograph — as a white South African citizen. Yes, it was my identity card. The very second I saw my picture as a white man, I stopped thinking of people who are not white as my equal. I felt like a being who has been projected from hell into heaven — where I would be beyond the sufferings of colour discrimination. I would never come back, it flashed through my excited mind, never in creation!

The first one I thought of was my white father. Tomorrow I would first call in at the factory and explain to the personnel manager what had happened and ask him to give me the day off to attend to my business.

I was lucky enough to find my father at his office next day, for Parliament was not yet in full session. I showed him the card. He congratulated me in a way I had never been congratulated before.

"Now you are a real white man. You must always stand by us. Don't ever associate with Coloureds, Indians and Africans. They are not your equal now. Stop going to that woman in Elgin. Very soon you will meet a white girl. You are good looking. Avoid discussions about your background. Tell anybody that your parents met with an accident and that you would rather not discuss the tragedy."

I agreed with my father. Now I did not hate him any more. I did not regard what he had done as wrong, in fact I did not give these things a second thought.

I was white. There was no more any need for me to hold my breath when I walked into a place reserved for white people only. No more mental agony about colour for me.

I was about to get up and leave when my father spoke again.

"Wait a moment," he said and got up. "I want to give you a present."

I was not expecting any money from him. He had given me the legacy of a secure future, his white heritage. I was glad that he was white. Never mind the more than £60,000 he had got some years ago when he sold the farm on which I had been born. I was glad to be his illegitimate son instead of the lawful son of my black foster father.

We got into my father's smart car and drove to a garage. He bought me a secondhand motor-scooter on condition that the salesman would teach me to drive that afternoon. He also gave me a cheque for £100. I had never had so much money in all my life.

"Bank at least the half of it," he advised. "You can buy whatever you want with the rest."

Within two days I had a driver's licence.

That Saturday afternoon I went to my mother in Elgin to say goodbye. I explained to the family that I was now a "Boss." They accepted the fact. My fosterfather, with his hat on one knee, supported his chin with his right hand while he stared at the floor. My mother was pouring black coffee.

On my way back, late that afternoon, I stopped the scooter on a hill. I got off and looked back once more. The kopjes and valleys never looked so green before, the sky never so blue. Nestled somewhere in a valley far away, where I could vaguely see miniature columns of smoke spiralling into the quiet sky, was the home of those who had raised me from babyhood to manhood. They were once my parents and now I am forbidden by apartheid to see them any more.

The scooter-motor exploded into action and I drove away forever from what was so dear, but not profitable, to me, into the white man's paradise. . .

[When Dawid de Vries failed to turn up at my flat, I contacted him at his work. He was a different man. When I spoke to him he addressed me as if I were dirt. He made it very clear that he was now a white man and my superior. Although he had previously begged me to write his life story, he now refused to give me any more details. There would be no return to you people, he told me.]

Dawid de Vries was so carried away by his white identity card that before he severed all ties with his former friends, he first showed it to as many of them as possible.

According to the existing law Dawid did not really qualify for a white citizenship. He lived a lie during his transitory period. Although he lived with white people in a white area, he never severed his association with the Coloured community. Until the time he received his identity card, he actually only slept in a white area. He associated with Coloureds during that time. He went with them to cinemas; he spent practically every week-end in Elgin; he visited the beaches with Coloureds. But he has found his way into the white man's paradise where he will stay until it is no more.]

[Concluded]

THE REV. PROF. BOLAJI IDOWU is professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan. This little book is made up of three radio talks he gave in Nigeria in 1961. They are an entirely justified plea for a true indigenisation of the Christian Church in Africa. He points out that even apparently accurate translations of English words (of prayers, hymns, ec.) into African languages may remain wholly "foreign" and even distorting through ignorance: e.g., most Nigerian languages are tonal, so that a song is made up of words and tune together; thus an exact verbal translation into Yoruba of "miserable offender" will, if put to a certain European tune, become "miserable one afflicted with tuberculosis of the glands." But more still: the spirit of Christianity must be able to express itself through African modes of feeling, gesture, life. The "separatist" church movements in West Africa (and this is true throughout the continent) have grown precisely because the traditional Christian Churches seem cold, inexpressive, distant: they seem to provide "an incomplete religion . . . something which begins and ends in Church buildings. . . . It does not seem to be something that is efficacious for them in every moment and every area of their lives." For, he reminds us, "to Nigerians nothing has meaning apart from the sanction and blessing of religion"; but precisely this universality of meaning was found in the "sects," not the "churches." Prof. Idowu's account of one or two of these movements is most illuminating. His book is valuable. It is perhaps a pity he did not correct one error: it was true in 1961 that the Roman Catholic church used exclusively Latin in services; but this is changing — indeed perhaps Prof. Idowu should make mention of the second Vatican Council, for he will now find many Roman Catholics on his side in these matters. But I hope all Christian bodies will listen to him.