

Is it so bad to be called a snake?

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Any society is as strong as the shared beliefs and values its members hold. When the social unit is a country — such as is the case when we claim democratic rights through shared citizenship — then understanding and acceptance of democratic processes and the right of all to participate in those are fundamental. “Democratic processes” refer to much more than periodic casting of votes, such as the April elections, although those moments provide a focus for examining our general commitment to social cohesion and the rights and duties that are given and demanded of all of us.

Implied in such an approach is something as basic as that of accepting a common humanity, with dignity and equality as essential goals, and the commitment of all to work towards and to protect those goals. The South African Constitution espouses these values of a common human dignity and of equality. Read the Preamble and the Founding Provisions. These values hold true, irrespective of what differences we perceive and choose to emphasise: be they gender, religion, citizenship or, most recently and immediately in the current context, just before and during the 2009 elections, political affiliation.

In response to gross and extensive violence against fellow human beings, analysts have warned against the first step of classifying people into essentialised groups, and attributing to them shared characteristics. That is, however, merely the first stage — to turn people into only women, only Tutsi, only Jews, only blacks, only Bosnians or only Catholics. These categories are given characteristics, abilities, behaviours and beliefs, which are said to be shared by all, without exception. The next step is clear, all individuality is removed, each member of the group is effaced and each one is only a “specimen” of the category.

What is of concern in South Africa today is that we are not only operating with categories of fellow humans — although the stereotypes that are held already allow (enable) the treatment of women with little regard, and permit racist acts — but the cases referred to here are also totally dehumanising of fellow citizens in the way in which they are addressed: “bitches”, “cockroaches”, “baboons”, “snakes” or “witches”, to name but some of the more recent examples, especially around the elections.

This is the process that allowed the genocide in Rwanda to take place. It also gave the power of community to the perpetrators, created or confirmed the solidarity of an “us”: “Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community building”, said Phillip Gourevitch on Rwanda. Here the term “cockroaches” was used to describe both Tutsi and the Hutu who “had been bought by the cockroaches”, who had become traitors to being Hutu. “Cockroaches” became the dehumanising term. A radio broadcast said: “You cockroaches must know you are made of flesh. We won’t let you kill. We will kill you.” Every Tutsi became a specimen rather than an individual, and so did those who sympathised with their lot, who saw them as fellow human beings, or who were accused of such sympathies.

We cannot let this dehumanising naming process continue in South Africa. We have

to guard against the dehumanising stereotyping in everyday life, and not just the public expression in the media or at political rallies. It occurs on the basis of ethnicity, citizenship, gender, race and sexuality. Such a call certainly does not negate the right to freedom of speech, of criticism, but instead calls on all to speak and act responsibly, mindful of our individuality, and respectful of a common human dignity.