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A Race Apart: the beauty queens of the apartheid era

The Miss World finalists are now at the World Cup, but the women who represented South Africa in its past have divided memories

So far the game has not been beautiful for the World Cup's "33rd official team". They have gone largely unnoticed in South Africa's impressive new stadiums, despite displaying frozen grins, tiny T-shirts and little resentment at being overshadowed by the men on the pitch.

This team are not footballers, but 31 Miss World finalists who arrived in Johannesburg two weeks ago to join their national squads on a mutual journey that will, for one, end in victory, fame and wealth.

Their intervention in this most testosterone-driven of tournaments is, ostensibly, to promote "Beauty with a Purpose", now a central theme of Miss World, and a point enthusiastically endorsed by President Zuma when he emerged, looking smitten, from a meeting with Miss South Africa, Nicole Flint. Reflecting on how she, as a white person, felt about representing South Africa at the World Cup, Flint said: "It is not a black 2010. It's about two races coming together, it's about a nation coming together and it's about being an example to the rest of the world to show them that we as South Africa can do this."

But in this unlikely melting-pot of sport and lip-gloss something is missing — any reminder of the women who competed to represent South Africa at a time when the nation was committed to keeping races apart. From 1970 to 1977, while South Africa tetered on the brink of meltdown with

brutal government oppression and township uprisings, international pressure forced the apartheid regime to send two finalists to the pageant — one white, and one black. The result was a catwalk battle that propelled some of the women to stardom, but broke others.

“When I got on to the victory podium I raised my fist,” Cynthia Shange says. “It was a black power salute. I got into a lot of trouble for that.” She was a Zulu girl from Lamontville, Durban’s oldest African township. In 1972 Shange boarded her first airplane, sipped a glass of champagne, and went to London. She was to take the stage at the Royal Albert Hall for Miss World, in what was then a huge glamourfest — but not as Miss South Africa.

“I was Miss Africa South,” Shange says. “In the Albert Hall two of us appeared under the same flag, but everything was upside down. I was representing a country that did not exist, there is no Africa South.” Beside her on stage — though kept apart for official photographs — was Stephanie Reinecke, a long-haired blonde who was also from Natal. “I got on well with Stephanie,” Shange says. “We were close, we talked about make-up and music and we kept in touch after we got back.” But their circumstances could not have been more different: Reinecke was the official Miss South Africa, having been crowned in Johannesburg City Hall. Shange says: “I can’t help feeling robbed. Of course I feel that I should have had the right to be Miss South Africa.” That Shange was able to take part in the contest at all was largely because of one man, Harry Solarsh, who owned a South African clothing company and sponsored Miss Africa South.

“Harry felt the mixed-race and black girls should have something too,” says Doreen Levin, a veteran reporter who wrote about Miss South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s for the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* newspaper.

Levin is now writing a book about the history of South African

beauty pageants. Miss Africa South was established as a non-white contest and Miss South Africa was strictly for whites only. “You have to understand Miss South Africa and Miss Africa South were two different contests,” she says.
According to the South African sociologist Deborah Posel, who runs the Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town, Miss South Africa and Miss Africa South were “a very apartheid idea. It was unthinkable to have an idea of beauty that encompassed all races. Black people were allowed to see themselves as beautiful, but white people weren’t allowed to see black people as beautiful. It was yet another apartheid oddity — a completely irrational expression of prejudice. Black people had their own contest — but it was second-class beauty.”

Shange was the third winner of Miss Africa South to attend Miss World, but the first African. The two women who preceded her were mixed-race girls from Cape Town, who were referred to as “Coloured”. Shange says that she would have failed the notorious apartheid pencil test, in which “Africaness” was measured by whether a pencil stuck in someone’s hair would stay in or drop out. “My hair is curly. God made it that way. It is beautiful. I have a flat nose. God made it that way, it is beautiful,” Shange says.
When she returned from her victory tour, however, South Africa did not think she was beautiful. “I got a modeling contract working with the Solarsh company. But when I travelled around the country I had to stop at roadhouses to eat and ask for food through the back door. There were stages I couldn’t appear on, doors I couldn’t go through, restaurants I couldn’t eat in.”

In New York she had been staggered when a white waiter offered to take off her coat. In South Africa the media were trained to pretend she didn’t exist. Other winners of Miss Africa South found the contrast too hard to bear,some slipping into obscurity, alcoholism, or becoming involved in religion. “When they came back there was nothing,” says Maureen Edwards, who won Miss Africa South in the 1960s before it

became part of Miss World. “Modeling contracts went to the white girls, even if they’d been lower placed.”
Miss Africa South was usually recognised with an open-topped car-ride, and a warm welcome in the non-white press, “but then back to the factory, or wherever they had been before”. “We took some photos together, but we went to different functions when we got back. That was how it was and I never questioned the fact,” Anneline Kriel says, recalling her non-white counterpart in the contest of 1974.

Kriel became a South African icon. The blonde prison officer’s daughter from the mining town of Witbank shot from “coal dust to stardust” by taking the Miss World crown after the British winner Helen Morgan was disqualified because she was an unwed mother.

“They came to offer me the crown and I wasn’t sure I wanted to take it. My steady boyfriend at the time was against it. He was training to be a priest in the Dutch Reformed Church and he said it would break us up. And it did.”

Kriel accepted, but in her own way was also to undergo a tortuous journey. With an international boycott of South Africa gathering steam, Kriel was vilified by the international media as the face of an apartheid nation; beaming on stage in a gold cloak of South African Krugerrands while her black countrymen suffered.After Kriel’s surprise victory, the US and Australia refused to accept her as part of the obligatory world tour, while other nations protested that they could not guarantee her safety.

“Shirley Bassey protested when I won,” Kriel says, offering no excuses for her ignorance of the politics of the time. In the sheltered world of a conservative Afrikaner town, with a heavily censored press, she had little exposure to the turmoil in the townships, or the opinions of the outside world. “I was 19. I was very innocent. When I finally went to America they asked me on TV if I thought everyone in my country was

happy — and I said yes, I did think everyone was happy. Because I did think that."

At a loss as to what to do with her, the Miss World organisers sent Kriel to a series of events at Mecca bingo halls in Margate and Southampton. While she speaks fondly of her time in England, Doreen Levin says it was a lonely, isolating and confusing experience: "She didn't really speak much English, and she had to translate everything into Afrikaans and then back into English again."

Back home Kriel received a warmer welcome, stepping off the plane into instant adulation; the coronation of an archetypal blonde South African princess was a propaganda coup — a symbolic two-fingers to a world that otherwise offered nothing but condemnation. Kriel remembers that crowds would gather in front of TV shop windows to see her: "We were too poor to have a television, but my dad used to go down and watch my interviews through the store window, and say to people: 'That's my daughter'." "There was not a lot else happening for white South Africa at the time,"Deborah Posel recalls.

If she was a political pawn of the time, Kriel now says her Miss World victory did little to enhance what became a successful international modeling career. Overseas her status as a famous former beauty queen was something she "kept quiet about". At home, however, relentless media interest in her life meant that "quiet" was never an adjective employed. Kriel remains one of the most talked about figures of white South Africa; a self-made star who stayed in the headlines by marrying and divorcing the hotel and casino magnate Sol Kerzner, acting in a Hollywood martial arts film, releasing a pop record, and finally settling down with her third husband in Cape Town.

"She has not exactly lived a humdrum life," Levin says. If memory of her victory in the white South African imagination remains undimmed, "she is actually a very nice woman," Posel says. "She is not stuck up, and she's

unaffected". Kriel now devotes her time to a charity that works with street children, and says: "As a country we are now in a much better place than we were then."

With no such fanfare, Cynthia Shange found the adjustment of returning to life in South Africa difficult — but in time she also became a national icon.

"When I was overseas and saw people of different races mixing together I thought, 'God, will things ever change in my country'?" Shange says. As a finalist in Miss World she had been granted a passport — a rarity for black South Africans — and allowed to travel across Europe and America, on condition that she refrained from talking about politics. But seeing first-hand the freedoms that she knew she could not enjoy in her own country was painful. "When I got home I had to tell myself to adjust or I knew it would disturb my mind." Shange married and divorced a well-known local journalist — "married for the first and the last time" — and became an actress. In 1972 she was the first black woman to be featured in South Africa's most popular magazine, *Fair Lady* and is now known for her role in the soap opera *Muhvango*. In 2009 Shange accepted a lifetime award at the South African Film and Television Awards.

The opportunities for her were great, but the opposition bitter. In total seven Miss Africa Souths attended Miss World between 1970 and 1977, but they found themselves the focal point of rancorous disputes within their own communities from those who believed that taking part alongside a white-only Miss South Africa legitimised apartheid. At its height the contest was held in secret because of fears of rioting. Finally, in 1977, all South African participation was withdrawn from Miss World after several countries threatened a boycott. The country did not return until apartheid began to crumble in 1990.

None of the Miss World finalists now visiting Johannesburg

will remember the days before democracy. Those attending the 2010 World Cup have been dutifully visiting children's hospitals, promoting issues as incongruous as local bus transport, and tooting their vuvuzelas for a beauty contest that may no longer scale the heights of a pageant once compered by Bob Hope and transmitted from the Albert Hall — but which still has the power to divide the world. (Miss World organisers were forced to switch the grand final from Nigeria to London in 2002 after a newspaper suggested that the Prophet Muhammad might have chosen a wife from among the contestants, an article blamed for sparking religious riots in which 200 people died.) In Miss World tradition, this year's finalists span a multicultural chasm, respecting all nations, and appearing on the pitch at Soccer City in Johannesburg in minuscule shorts.

"I am grateful to Harry Solarsh for fighting so hard to put us on the map," Shange says, "even though we felt like we were being done a favour." Despite all that she went through Shange says that Miss Africa South and Miss World opened the door to a new life for her; although it was not one open to all her fellow contestants. "When I got back I suffered, but I look at my daughter and I'm so proud. She goes wherever, she stands on any stage, travels overseas. Nothing is impossible for her."

For those who were Miss South Africa and Miss Africa South the tumultuous 1970s were a surreal combination of limousines, champagne, fake lashes and swimsuit contests mixed with politics, protests and brutal oppression.

"All I can say," Shange says, "is that it was an experience that will remain with me until I die."