

# cricket's infamous coolie creeper



Journalists legitimated the use of this racist label, argues Lynette Steenveld.

In February 1999, cricketer Brian McMillan urged a team-mate to bowl a 'coolie creeper' to opponent Ashraf Mall. He was subsequently reprimanded for the use of the term because it was racist, and ordered to make a public apology.

The coverage of this incident in the local press explored whether or not the term 'coolie creeper' is indeed 'racist', as claimed by United Cricket Board (UCB) officials. 'Racist language' was never defined, but there was a sense that terms which demeaned particular 'racial' groups, could be considered 'racist'. Another issue that troubled journalists was whether the unwitting use of 'racist' language by a user, in this case a cricketer hero, implied that he was a racist.

At the heart of the coverage was a concern about language as a vehicle for racism. However, there was little written about how the portrayal of groups is related to the wider social context.

Virtually all the newspapers represented the issue as one in which a respected cricketer – one of our boys – affectionately referred to as 'Big Mac', uttered a 'harmless' cricketing term which was then taken up as a political issue by some sports bureaucrats.

His action was legitimised in terms of:

- his standing in the cricketing community;
  - the fact that the term is traditional 'cricket jargon' which has been used the world over for a long time;
  - that the person who should have been insulted (if it were a slur), namely Mall, was not, but laughed along with the others;
  - the context in which the term was used was the 'old cricket pastime of sledging or chirping'.
- This 'reasonable' reasoning is based on the controversial assumptions that:
- language is 'innocent';
  - that the areas of 'sport' and 'politics' can be separated into two mutually exclusive domains;
  - that sport is a-social, a-historical and a-political,

instead of being socially (and politically and historically) constructed;

- that language use is similarly a-social, a-historical and a-political.

These assumptions underpin the media arguments which, taken together, underrate the racism entailed in the whole issue.

While legitimising the innocence of McMillan, most newspapers acknowledge that some form of hurt was caused. In so doing, the journalistic claim of 'balance' could be made, even though the overwhelming meaning of the reportage was that it was 'only a cricketing term', and that it is the 'politicisation' of sport that has caused the problem. In other words, without this interference, there would be no problem.

As in this particular story, generally the 'liberal' press follows the norms of 'balanced, fair and objective' coverage. What this means is that in most cases 'both sides of the story' will be given. But what is evident is that the way in which these 'two sides' are covered is often qualitatively different. Thus the ideological stance or perspective of the writer or paper is evident despite this apparent attention to journalism's ideals.

The media's attitude to, or perspective on, the use of the term 'coolie creeper' can be identified as follows:

- First, through the selection of sources. These are often 'key' definers – but from a particular,

limited perspective, and used in a particular order. For example, McMillan was the key source, and where the UCB's Cassiem Doerat was quoted, it would typically be low down in the story.

■ A second way in which the journalist's perspective is evident is in the assumptions on which arguments (and comments) are made. Thus, because sport and politics are seen to be separate domains, 'interference' of the one into the other is wrong.

Another assumption is that to be offended by the use of particular terms implies that one cannot take a 'joke', or that one 'has a chip on one's shoulder'. These latter two justifications are typical of the 'blame the victim' syndrome.

■ Thirdly, the kinds of 'validation' resorted to. For example, the argument that the 'coolie creeper' phrase has been used 'the world over', 'for a long time'. This implies, illogically, that the words are acceptable.

■ Fourthly, the lack of context, or scope of context. Thus while a history of the use of the phrase might have been given, what was absent from this history was the social and political context of its use, namely, colonial domination.

■ Fifthly, the narrative construction (which 'facts' are chosen) and the framework of the story. This was evident in the way journalists portrayed the matter as a language problem or a problem of political interference into sport. A different perspective would have framed the story differently.

■ Finally, the choice of words. Terms like 'cricket jargon' and reference to the UCB 'nannying' are not neutral. The formulation of the issue as the 'problem' of 'delving deeply' into the meanings of words implies that if this were not done, then there wouldn't be a problem.

One can posit at least three reasons why the media presented the story with arguments mainly in favour of McMillan.

■ First, the economic imperative to attract audiences exerts pressure on the media to work within the presumed 'consensus' – that which 'everyone believes to be true'. In this way, journalists end up both reflecting and reproducing the perceived 'common sense' of the audience or niche market that their publication serves.

In the particular world inhabited by most of the writers, there was little question that McMillan's conduct was legitimate and that readers could be presumed to share this assessment.

■ Secondly, the routines of news gathering, which are determined by an economic imperative. These result in the use of elite, known, 'reputable', 'taken-for-granted' sources, and a lack of time to chase other sources.

■ Thirdly, poor journalism. This is manifested in poor research, or not enough research; interviewing that is not probing enough; writing stories without a context, or an inadequate context; writing that evidences poor logic and poor language use.

While media racism can be identified in language, it is also the result of a wider set of economic imperatives, news routines and standard journalism. And it can manifest itself not only in the use of particular words, but also in the logic of the arguments used to report them.

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## DOMINIC THORBURN b. 1958

### "Salt in the Wound"

This image is derived from an original daguerreotype portrait of Elizabeth Margaret Salt.

At the height of the battle, the main defence garrison of East Fort found themselves running out of gunpowder.

Elizabeth insisted she would run the gauntlet to Mud Fort to fetch a keg of gunpowder.

The legend goes that, despite appeals from the menfolk, she set forth clutching a bundle which appeared to be a baby in arms.

Reported the *Grocotts Penny Mail* on August 28 1912: "Margaret stepped out into clear sunshine, and the pressing savages paused to see her, yells echoed round her head, spears shook uncertain, kerries brandished. She walked on serenely."

Her return with the gun powder "helped win a memorable day".

Elizabeth Salt exploited the Xhosa moral of not harming women and children in conflict.

