Yusuf (Joe) Ibrahim

race: coloured (Malay)

?As I say, kind of a personal history, because with everyone I'm doing it on that level, but you shouldn't that I'm asking you were you were born and when?

YE: I was born on the 9th April 1943, in a suburb of Cape Town called Wynberg.

?And at that stage was Wynberg specifically a racial area?

YE: It had the same division as all other areas in South Africa in that there was a so-called coloured area, and a so-called white group area. So it was very much the same in that respect.

?Do you want to be named as Yusuf Ebrahim or Joe - what's your preference?

YE: It doesn't matter to me. I mean, everyone knows me as Joe Ebrahim, so it's quite in order.

?Okay. As you were growing up did you have a lot of exposure to people of other races or was it really that coloured ghetto experience initially?

YE: Well, before you started recording you mentioned the question of non-racialism, so perhaps I should just preface my remarks by saying that I don't recognise that there are different races in the world. There's only one race and that's the human race.

It is so that people have different colours and different physical, but that doesn't make them different. They are all human beings. They all have the basic, same bodily structure, some physiological and biological features. So from that premise, if you are asking me if I have had contact with people who the South African government classified differently, then that is so.

My father was a businessman and he had a shop. So that exposed me to contact with people over a wide range; from the poorest to the richest, from those who were highly qualified to those who had no education. In that respect it was probably a greatly educational experience.

?I find it interesting for you to say at that age and stage of experience, that you didn't recognise the different races. I could pick any other person in Athlone and perhaps come up with someone who would have the mentality of only being willing to describe themselves as coloured - not even black and certainly not having that understanding. So what I'm trying to do is to take you back and go through the process?

YE: Fair enough

?Okay, but I would very much like you to explain more as we get onto the theoretical?

YE: Well, my family background, if you looking at classifications in terms of South Africa's Population Registration Act, then my mother was classified as so-called Indian, my father was classified as so-called Malay, because of the fact that he had a family background in terms of which they classified him as such.

My mother and father both received some education - my mother less than my father. I think my mother left school in Standard Four, or Five, and my father only went as far as Standard Eight, which would be two years before you finish your matriculation. He had to leave in order to help the family, in the family business. At that time it wasn't a shop, they were trading in fruit and vegetables.

But the one thing he tried to instil in all of us was the need for education. I was highly appreciative of that, in fact, he made it very clear that education was something which no-one could take away from you. They could deprive you of your rights, they could deprive you of many things - but your education was in your mind, and that, no-one could take away from you.

So he was very insistent that all of us should complete, at the very least, our matric and then proceed from there. Obviously, like most parents had the time, they also had certain ideals as far as their children's education was concerned. And there were certain glamour profession that they wanted their children to go into.

So in the case of my elder brother, we were four brothers, I'm the second oldest - they were very keen that he should become a doctor. In fact, he did. In my case, I'd always professed from a very young age that I'd wanted to be an attorney, for some reason or another. And some of the family also thought that I would become a good attorney, because they thought that I had the gift of the gab, so my family always used to joke about that.

And strangely enough, when I left school, I then went to university, and the first year I did very, very poorly. I didn't pass any of my students.

?At UWC [University of the Western Cape]?

YE: No, at UCT - that's the University of Cape Town, ja. I had some problems in getting in, partly because my application was late. And then I was admitted into the B.Comm degree with a view to doing an LLB, and I think that was one of the reasons why I failed to do well, was because I wasn't cut out to do a commerce course at all. And I just didn't have

much interest.

So after the first year when I failed, I then decided that I would prefer to go and work, because my family, whilst being business people, I felt, couldn't just afford to keep two at university, and especially one who wasn't doing well. I then enroled as a part-time student. But the problem was I carried on working in the family shop and with the long hours, I realised that that wasn't going to work out.

So eventually I decided to go and work independently. And I started off as a wage clerk in a clothing factory, where they made shirts. If I think about it, and that's probably apart from the fact that I worked in the shop and had exposure to a wide range of people, that my experience in the clothing factory was perhaps, one of the things that laid a basis for my development later on - in the way my thought processes developed, because, management felt, or was very firmly of the viewpoint, that as a member of the clerical staff, I should not associate with the average worker.

They were at pains to keep me apart from the average worker. They were at pains also, to sway me from getting involved in trade union activities. I found that very interesting and intriguing, and after I had been there for about a year and a half, I realised that I wasn't cut out to work as a wage clerk in a factory. It was stifling - management was totally in control of you in that situation. I felt that I was stagnated.

I then decided to go and seek articles, as an attorney, and then to pursue my legal studies on a part-time basis. Then the effects of the apartheid systems was brought home very, very visibly, and I had to go around from attorney to attorney to ask them for articles.

It became pretty obvious that no-one was interested in articling any person who was not classified as white. And this was about 1963, I think. And I literally walked just about every street in Cape Town - knocked at the door of every firm of attorneys. And I then became articled, eventually to an attorney, who I suppose better remain nameless, who professed that he was very keen on giving so-called non-whites the opportunity of furthering their studies.

In reality, he was only using them as cheap labour. At that time, when I started my articles, he was one of the few firms that articled blacks or non-whites, if you like. And up till that stage, two attorneys had qualified from the black community who had worked for him. And others had either been articled as bandent(?), and perhaps there were slightly more than two I think, but be that as it may, there

were two quite prominent ones.

When I started working for him I was paid R20,00 a month. In terms of the value of currency at that time, it was little enough. In relation to the value of the Rand at the moment, it is of course absolutely nothing. But even then it wasn't worth that much. It became very obvious to me very, very soon, that he looked upon us just simply as cheap labour. In fact, he never went out of his way to teach you anything.

I stayed with him for two and a half years, and that also reinforced my thought processes, in that I began, at that stage, to realise that having a black skin meant that you were discriminated against, very, very forcibly in South African society.

The one thing that this particular attorney taught me, very inadvertently, was that if you were to attain anything, you had to stand up and face people. Up until then, I had been reared in the family situation where the whole question of respect for elders was extremely important. In fact, so much so, that as a child you were never meant to be in adult company, you had to be very respectful. Even if someone wasn't related, you had to address them as a type of uncle, or an aunt.

It was a very difficult period for me to adapt to - here I was confronted by an individual who was clearly, surprisingly racist in his attitude, because he happened to be of the Jewish faith. He had in fact, served as the legal adviser to the Austrian government at some stage. He had obviously been very closely involved with activities during the Second World War, and I would have thought that such an individual would have been far more sympathetic than anyone else in regard to any type of racial discrimination. But it was abundantly clear that he was a racist.

And that brought home to me another lesson, that you couldn't simply accept at face value individuals, no matter how much they may have been involved in particular situations. And one had a tendency, that when people are involved, to simply accept that they are committed. And that taught me that that wasn't necessarily so - in fact, it was just the opposite.

During the two and a half years I was with him, I became very much more confident. In fact, it was a rather traumatic period, in many respects, because he objected to the fact that I stood up for what I thought was right. We had many verbal fights, until eventually, one day, as a result of my coming late to work on two consecutive mornings, he threw me out, and a certain duce of my articles

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cancelled.

From there I moved to the firm, A. M. Omar and Co., who you've probably heard about.

?Dhalla Omar?

YE: Dullah
Dhalla Omar. And I became articled to him, and there, of course, I was exposed to legal work of a very challenging nature, because we acted mostly for people in the poorer section of the community, who had all kinds of problems as a result of the system. It was really a very great educational period for me, apart from the fact that Dhalla Omar was the type of person whom you could empathize with, and that was important.

I completed my articles there. I completed my diploma in Law, and I then qualified in December 1970. I stayed on with the firm until the end of October 1973, and I then took the mammoth leap of going out on my own, which is a frightening prospect. For the first few years, it was extremely tough going, because I only had a secretary. The two of us battled along until we eventually became established.

And looking back now I can't really think how I survived during that period, but somehow I did. I found myself also in the fortunate situation that I began to get legal work which was again of a challenging nature, of a nature which brought me into direct contact, or conflict if you like, with the system. That I found very challenging, I found it stimulating. I found it something that I could relate to, and that's basically my background.

?Okay. Then let me take you back a bit, just to go way back. Again I understand your non-racial point of view even to the point of defining the terms, but back, when you were quite young growing up in Wynberg - until when were you in Wynberg?

YE: I was there until 1973 - I moved out in 1973 to a suburb called Heathfield.

?And then to Athlone?

YE: No, no. I'm actually staying in Heathfield, but my practise is in Athlone.

?I see. When you were five or ten years old - back then, even 15 - before you went on to university, if someone had asked you what you race was, would you have said you're coloured?

YE: Yes, regrettably so, but certainly so.

?What would the word coloured mean then? What would the kind of

negative or positive associations that you have? What did it mean?

YE: There weren't any positive connotations to it at all. It meant that you were of mixed blood, in the same that the word coloured is used over in America, it had the same kind of connotations. Added to that, one accepted that you didn't have the franchise, that you weren't, in effect, recognised as being a citizen of the country. As a child, although you became very irate at the fact that you weren't given proper recognition, you accepted that there was discrimination, that it was a fact of life, something you had to contend with and in fact, try and overcome in some way.

?And was it a strictly coloured area, did it have Indians as well?

YE: At that time, there were people who were classified as Indian, certainly staying in the Wynberg area. The reason for that being, that there was very limited land available for so-called Indians to buy homes. So they certainly stayed there.

?But your own background - what did it mean to have a mother classified Indian and a father who was classified Malay? What's your culturally affinity, did that make you a different kind of coloured? Did you have any more affinity to the Indian community? I am just wondering what that meant in concrete terms?

YE: I had more affinity to the Indian community in the sense that my father was classified, in terms of the law, as Malay, had a great affinity with the Indian community. That's probably how he came to marry my mother. So I had a far greater affinity to the so-called Indian community than any other community. That's the community I grew up in, in the sense of cultural contact. But where we stayed in Wynberg, the particular area wasn't an Indian community.

In fact, the house that we stayed in was literally above the railway - the line of demarcation was the railway line - the coloured was below that. We were above, and the only reason we were staying there was because the shop was right next door to it. So the friends I developed during my childhood were all friends who were so-called coloured, because that's the school I attended also, the primary school and the high school.

My contact with the Indian community was merely on occasions like weddings or religious days, and that. My upbringing, or rather let's not say my upbringing, my parents very much wanted to rear me in a particular way, but my contacts were of such a particular nature, I found myself more in the so-

called coloured community than in the Indian community.

?Do you speak Afrikaans?

YE: Yes.

?With your family or with the kids?

YE: No, my family is English, or bilingual really, my mother and father. We speak mostly English - we do switch to Afrikaans very often. My own immediate family, my children and my wife, we speak English. The only time I would speak Afrikaans to my kids is purely from a point of view of educating them on something.

?And when you were quite young, to little kids - again this is the level I'm trying to go into, it's actually interesting for me - I've so many interviews that I kind of pick up what's different to explore - and I mean, if you look at the non-racial society that's being built even in this country, a lot of the revelations or experience would come from kids. Did it make a difference to those kids, that maybe a majority of them would look more like their African heritage than you did? Would that come up at all? Do you remember that?

YE: Oh yes, that's definite. At the time that I grew up as a child, there's no doubt that people tried to look more white than they look black, simply because they hoped that in that way, they'd be gaining the privileges that they could from society. In fact, it was rather tragic that in the so-called coloured community, you would find that people would look down on someone who looked more so-called African than they did. There's no doubt about it - it certainly existed.

?Were there those who would say to you, "Hey you're lucky you don't look as dark of African"?

YE: Oh certainly. In fact, you'd not only find it amongst so-called coloureds, but you'd find it amongst so-called whites, who would express surprise that you could speak English fluently. They wanted to know which school did you go to, where were you reared, how did you manage to speak English so well? Afrikaans people would also say, "But where did you learn to speak Afrikaans so well?"

So you had this kind of situation that everyone was rather intrigued as to how you were able to speak two particular languages, and there would very often be comments that you look Jewish and you didn't look black - that kind of comment.

?Do you remember any phase in your own background, or with your own family, where people would say, you'll be better of because you're not as dark, that that was seen as an advantage?

YE: Oh yes. That was certainly the period that I lived through, and as I indicated people would try in which ever way they could to look whiter than what they were. They would use light cream, they would style their hair in such a way that it appeared to be softer than someone else's. There were all kinds of things that unfortunately took place. It was rather tragic that a racial policy could destroy people's pride in themselves in that manner. It was really very tragic.

?What about the cultural significance of the community you grew up in - in the wider community? I mean today it was conference that closed with traditional African dancing, you can say that Shona people have that cultural heritage. Often people in these interviews have talked about, what's the coloured culture. I'm interested in, for you, what was your cultural reference? Did Malay mean anything, was there something that you've identified would be the kids who you played with who spoke Tsotsitaal, or what would coloured culture mean to you?

YE: Well, I mentioned to you earlier, insofar as my cultural exposure was concerned, or let's say my upbringing by my parents was concerned, that would be more Indian than so-called Malay. The only reason that I think that my father didn't oppose his classification as so-called Malay was because it obviously meant in the structure of South African society that he was slightly less discriminated against that a so-called Indian. He could buy in a so-called coloured area, whereas an Indian was restricted to limited land in so-called Indian areas.

?Especially in Cape Town?

YE: So that had that advantage, otherwise I'm sure that he would have probably have said that, "Look, I would have prefer to be classified as so-called Indian." But because of those disadvantages he left it as it is, but his family background; my mother's family background - that type of contact, was certainly more orientated towards Indian culture than to any other type.

?What do you think took you of that? What made you keen to not take those advantages, and work for someone like Dhalla Omar, instead of figuring that you could pass as.., move right into an echelon because of just the coincidences of your skills? You got classified yourself as Malay?

YE: Er, Yes.

?Is that what your book of life says?

YE: Yes, I think that's correct.

?Or is it "other coloured", there's also ..?

YE: No, no, I think it's classified as Malay, that's right.

?What do you think did take you out of it, or what made you even, ja, what do you think were the factors that made you move? I'd like to move on to talk about SACOS, but just before we do that, that made you even get into the stream that would have taken you there as opposed to say, talking about capitalism not wanting to know, going in that direction - what do you think it was?

YE: Well, first of all, the school I went to was an education, in the sense that I came across people who weren't only so-called Indians. It was predominantly what one would term as a so-called coloured school.

?Which school was this?

YE: Battswood Primary - BATTSWOOD - and that simply, made me aware that they were different people, in the sense that not all people have the same skin colour, not all people have the same hair, not all people have the same kind of appearance. All that did at that particular stage, in all honesty was simply to make me aware of that.

I don't think that when I was in primary school, there was any question of my becoming very politically aware as to what the situation was. I simply knew that people looked different, as to what it meant, it didn't mean anything to me at that stage.

But when I went to high school, in Standard Seven - I went to Trafalgar High School, and then I really became exposed to what South African society was all about. Trafalgar High had a reputation of being that prided itself on a very progressive outlook. There were at that time, three school, Trafalgar High was one, Harold Cressy was another, and Livingstone was the third. ↖Check sp Cressey?

All had particularly proud records of teachers who weren't afraid of the South African government, teachers who took pride in giving you education on a far broader level than the so-called coloured education was meant to be, Teachers who were politically aware, teachers who were politically committed, and that I think, - not that I think, I know - that, particular four years that I spent there, certainly opened my eyes.

If anything, that is the period when my base was laid. In fact, whilst I was at Trafalgar, I think it was in my first year at Trafalgar, if I remember correctly, the late Ben Kies ~~Kess~~, I don't know if you know who he was?

?When did he die?

YE: He died about five, six years ago. He was a teacher there and the department then took steps to dismiss him from the Education Department. And the students had a protest at the school, and that was part of my formative process, then I became aware of the whole situation. There were a number of other teachers who taught, who, in all their teachings made it very clear that the skin colour of an individual did not mean inferiority in any way - the differences did not mean there was an inferiority.

Whites in South Africa weren't superior, didn't have a divine right to rule South Africa. In fact, the whites had come to South Africa and dispossessed the natural inhabitants of the land, and politically removed their political rights, and in fact, had over 300 years completely subjugated them into submissive people. That was the type of education I received.

And apart from that I was also exposed to cultural activity in the true sense of the word, where there were lectures, there were other functions that one could attend - where people did political analyses. You were then able to get a far broader and accurate picture of what SAn society really consisted of, what it's political structure was, what was happening in the rest of the world. I then became exposed to the concept of non-racialism.

?[through these, through that [fade - mumble]?

YE: The schooling I had at Trafalgar and the cultural activities that I attended.

?Now when you mention the teachers, were they.. we talked about the general principles that they expounded, but were they specifically TLSA, or Unity Movement?

YE: Definitely. That was the predominant political movement at the time. Most of them were, I think, all of them were TLSA members. Most of them were also Unity Movement members at that stage, then it was called the Non-European Unity Movement, if you remember. No that's definite.

?Now when you were growing, what do you think the first political movement was that you heard of; or what were the ones that you grew up knowing about?

YE: Well, because of the school that I went to, the first one I heard about was the Non-European Unity Movement, there's no doubt about that. I also became aware of the Congress Movement; I became aware of the Communist Party which, at that stage, although I think had been banned already, but people were aware of. Of course, I was aware of the white political movement at that time - the Nationalist Party,

the United Party - that kind of thing.

?And what were the images of them for you? Which one were you drawn more too? Did you become a member of any?

YE: In all honesty, I was drawn to the Unity Movement. I suppose, primarily because of my exposure to it. I found that I could identify with most of the principles and policies it was expounding.

?Like what? What impressed you, do you remember?

YE: Concepts of the equality of all people. The concept that the South African government did not have a divine right to rule, as was propagated at the time. That they had, in fact, invaded South Africa, by strength and force of arms, they had dispossessed the people of the land and rights. The role of the missionaries in the whole question of dispossessing the people of land in Southern Africa, in fact the rest of Africa - made me very aware of the role the church played in politics.

Although the church has always professed to stand aloof from politics, that was brought home very forcibly. I became aware that South African society was divided for political reasons, not because of biological, sociological or cultural differences between people, that if you looked at countries in Europe, if you looked at some of the other countries around the world, that it was possible for people to identify with one another, despite cultural differences.

They could have a common allegiance to a particular country. In South African you didn't have that kind of situation. Those were the lessons that were brought home to me at that particular stage.

?And did you meet any leaders of the Unity Movement of TLSA?

YE: Well, I was too young really to be speaking to them on equal terms. Ben Kies was one of the prominent ones, the late Rev. Wessels was one. There was..

?His first name?

YE: Er, what was his first name.

?[mumble]?

YE: His son, Victor Wessels, was, I would say, a great influence. There was Dhalla Omar - there was a chap, Slingers, van Squre. I would say all the prominent individuals in the Unity Movement at that stage.

?And the fact that these were all people who were classified

coloured, do you think that was a factor? Do you think it seemed more of a logical hold? I mean if you were at Trafalgar, it was a so-called coloured school? Was that something that was discussed - the fact that the Unity Movement tended - I have actually interviewed Tabatha and I know the Honono - but other than those two, there really weren't ..?

YE: No, I wouldn't say that was a factor. In fact, if one looks at the political history of the Unity Movement, and the literature they put out, they've always been at pains to spell out that the whole situation which prevails in South Africa, is one of, what is popularly known as divide-and-rule - where they have attempted to divide people up. In fact, they were very much aware that they needed to identify with people who were classified as so-called African.

What the precise reasons were for that failure to win over people, I think, there are a number of reasons for that. One of them is the fact of the Group Areas, the other thing is, I think one must accept that the Unity Movement unfortunately, placed its, or rather aimed its message at too high a level.

It tended to theorise so much that people couldn't relate to it. And that is a criticism that one must accept, that it didn't bring down its whole policy to a level were the average person could understand it. Without attempting to sound discriminatory myself, the educational system which prevailed at that time, resulted in the mass of so-called African people not having a very high education.

I think the Unity Movement failed to address itself to that particular problem. Had it simplified its approach, it is more likely that it could have won a lot of individuals over. But it unfortunately, was addressing itself to a more intellectual level. And because of the unfair structure of the educational system, so-called coloureds were more attracted to the Unity Movement.

Whereas the Congress Movement, which existed at that, addressed itself in far more simple terms to the average working individual - and that is why they made those inroads. Apart from that, one has also got to accept, that so-called racial divisions in South Africa, have existed for so many years, and it was difficult for people who were classified in one way to readily identify with the politics of someone else. And there was some suspicion involved, there was mistrust, and that militated against the Unity Movement being able to make the kind of inroads it should have made.

So when the Congress Movement, which had been founded amongst so-called blacks, started developing more forcefully, it was natural that people who were classified

as so-called black would identify with it – And not necessarily because of the policies they were espousing, the whole question of group identify has been so ingrained in South Africa, that even now, today, people tend to look at one another on a group basis, instead of looking at the ideas that people espouse, the principles they uphold.

You very often see, people feel a greater empathy with someone who is black as yourself, than you do with someone of another colour. This is part of the process that, I suppose, just has to develop in order to destroy that.

?Does that mean for you when you were growing, by the time you were aware of things, in the late 50s and 60s, that the coloured movement was Unity Movement? Could you think of any classified coloured people who were in Congress?

YE: By the way, I'm talking about the early 60s now - mid-50s, early 60s. How old was I in 1950 - I would have been, mind you, I was born in '43, and 50 would only be seven, so I am talking about mid-50s onwards, from 12/13 onwards.

Oh no! The Congress movement had people who were classified as so-called coloured, but it had the Coloured People's Congress, it had the African People Congress, and it had the Indian People's Congress. Now, the reason why I couldn't easily identify with that was because they were retaining the racial divisions that the South African government had introduced.

From my understanding of the universal propositions which were being propagated, that you were only Indian if you stayed in India, you were African if you were part of the African continent. Now I considered as part of the African continent, and I would have been quite happy, and I am quite happy to accept myself as being African in that context.

But I could not accept that I had to be proud that I was Indian by birth and staying in South Africa. In the same way that the French who left France and settled in America; the English who left England and settled in America; and the various other people who came there. Eventually, all recognised themselves as being Americans, first and foremost.

The so-called blacks who were brought in as slaves, whilst there is obviously racial discrimination in America, the position today is that they consider themselves American. In fact, at that time there was the movement over in America for so-called Negroes to gain recognition as Americans. And that is the same way I looked at the situation, and perhaps that might have been a stronger factor in drawing me to the Unity Movement than drawing me to Congress.

?Does that mean you really just rejected the idea of a Coloured People's Congress, and that would have kept you away from the ANC?

YE: Yes, yes.

?Had you heard of Alex la Guma or Reg September at the time?

YE: Yes, yes, I had.

?So what was your view of their participation in the ANC through the SACP?

YE: Well, I thought that they were trying to propagate their colouredness, if you like, which I was against. I couldn't see one destroying the political system by maintaining your coloured or Indian identity - that you, in fact, had to accept that you were a South African in the true sense of the word and get rid of that kind of identity.

?Which makes a lot of sense given your background, this ridiculous things of South Africa trying to classify you, I just wonder how you view, say Natal or Jo'burg, where you've got a history of the TIC and NIC, you've got the Gandhian connection - how did you view the argument, then and now, - when you've got the older women in their saris who are just never going to come out for any political organisation, except, possibly, an Indian Congress?

YE: Well, I would say that one of the prime examples of the danger in trying to organise people on the basis of their classification, in terms of South African politics, is demonstrated by the position in India itself. There, there has been recognition given, over decades to the caste system, and it creates terrible animosity. In fact, it has led to riots in India, where you find that the Sikhs are recognised as a caste apart from some others. There is always this type of fighting which takes place.

You've seen that kind of division split the whole of India on religious grounds, where people of a Muslim faith felt that they had to have a separate identity, and in fact, establish Pakistan; and those who followed Hinduism remained in India. And it has also been shown by the establishment of Israel, where people who are Jews have claimed the right to establish themselves in the country, purely on the basis of religious beliefs.

Now, I don't think any person who seriously subscribes to the equality of all men, in not in the sexist sense, but in the equality of man as such, can accept that there have to be divisions on any kind of basis. I don't see that my religious beliefs must be a reason for my having to gain recognition as an independent individual on that basis; or

the fact that I have a different cultural background; or the fact that I'm black or brown or white.

After all, if you couldn't see me, if you could simply listen to what I had to say, how would you have to judge me - you'd have to judge me on what I'm saying, what my ideas and principles are. So why should the colour of my skin or religion, or anything else, influence you in determining whether what I'm speaking about is the truth.

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?I think I'd like to follow that up. I think that's quite a good point. Does that mean to this day, you will oppose the UDF policy of TIC and NIC affiliated, having a white area committee of UDF, or white JODAC?

YE: [nervous cackle] Let me say it is not a question of opposition, I want to make that very clear. I'm not opposed to the Congress movement, I'm not opposed to the UDF, I'm not opposed to anyone who is seeking to change South Africa to a truly just society, and a society where there is no discrimination, no exploitation, where there's no oppression.

What I am saying is that people who feel they have to organise individuals on the basis of some racial classification or cultural classification, are misreading the situation - that it's going to become immensely difficult, or more difficult, the longer we retain those divisions, ~~to get people~~ to get people to accept that they are all equal.

And it is vital if you are seeking a society in which we recognise the equality of all, the sooner we remove those divisions, the sooner we put into practise what we say we believe in, the better it is going to be.

If I could use another example, let's take it to sport, which I think shows one the fallacy of the whole situation - so long as someone maintains that black athletes have to run in a separate race, because they can never compete equally with whites, and therefore we have to have a black sports organisation which accommodates them; and we have to have a white organisation - the more difficult it becomes to show, in effect, that there is no difference.

?But your theory has flaws for starters, because no-one is saying they can't compete, or they have to be separate - I think the theory is, as I understand it, that it is easier, and it's logical and it has it's advantages to organise in Lenasia in the TIC, but there's absolutely no reason why TIC, or a person in Lenasia, couldn't join any other UDF affiliate, the Johannesburg Youth Congress or whatever. So it's not a: it's impossible and therefore it makes it separate, it's just a convenience thing, it's an identity thing. But I mean, I'm only just saying that that...?

YE: No, no, no. I accept what you're saying. The logical conclusion one has to take that to - that you're in fact saying to them that we recognise that you are different.

?And you're not recognising that?

YE: No. I mean that is the danger in the whole situation.

You're saying to them that they are different, that you have a home on your own, although you can mix with someone else, or you're free to go where you like. It's tantamount to the South African government saying to me that, "We are still going to classify you, but we are going to remove the Group Areas Act - you're free to go and stay where you want to, but we still recognise that you are coloured, or you are black, or you are Indian". Now why retain those classifications.

?I think it is an interesting point, I mean, if I have to fill out a form even in this country that asks your race, I don't put it down?

YE: Quite.

?Which sometimes causes trouble in insurance companies, and things like that. Sure, I think that's a matter of principle, but at the same time, what does it mean for your daily like in terms of, aren't there times where there those differences are relevant at a certain point, where you might find that the people of, again the Cape is such a different situation, but the key people in the Transvaal in the Indian community, they are just not going to be able to meet the people of Soweto?

YE: Aah! But that's where the flaw is in the argument that you present right now: that you have got to organise people on the basis of the colour, what he looks like, colour, some kind of religious difference or so. It's not even a religious difference.

?Just community, it's just that Lenasia is 20 miles out of town, and they just, they never get to Soweto?

YE: Yes, but now surely that is the type of thing that we have got to educate people about. We've got to say to people that look, whilst the state's policy keeps you apart, in effect, there's no difference between you and that individual - I'm talking here about biological or physiological differences - there are differences on the basis of economy, on the basis of culture, but those aren't sufficient to keep us apart, and shouldn't be sufficient to keep us apart.

Because, given the South African situation, and the South African economy, those who have the lighter skin colour have the greater advantages, and therefore will always be economically better off, whilst the system is maintained. We've got to get people to start thinking in terms of a new society where everyone is going to have an equal opportunity of attaining some level, and not because that individual is so-called Indian or African.

Now, let's assume, that tomorrow the South African

government was out of power, and let's assume that the people of South Africa, the real people of South Africa, move into parliament. How are we then going to address this problem of saying to the so-called Indians in Lenasia, that sorry, you can now, no longer accept that you are different, that you have the right to organise yourself on an Indian basis.

Can that happen overnight? It can't. It is an educational process. Now, what I'm saying, is people who are involved in bringing about the liberation, must lead by example, and must show people that we cannot continue to look upon ourselves on the basis of the racial classifications that the South African government has imposed. It is in that way, you develop people's thinking processes to show their resistance to the South African system; otherwise there is acceptance.

People say, I am happy to be Indian, I am happy to be African; if that's the way I'm classified so be it. But they are not developing mentally to oppose. My belief is that - it's not really my own, it's not something I've developed myself - many people have said it before, people have different levels of resistance when they are involved in a struggle against oppression and exploitation.

Now you can't ask a child, for example, to understand what the armed struggle is all about, if he doesn't have the first idea of what the whole concept of resistance is. What I'm saying is that, surely, you first have to mentally understand that you have to resist a particular system, before you can get that person to lay down his life, as part of the struggle.

And I think people have different levels of struggle. You find that there are people who, first of all understand that the system is wrong, that they are opposed to the system, that they are opposed to apartheid, they are opposed to oppression and exploitation. They go about their lives knowing that that is the situation, but they take it no further. So they don't get involved in organisations, they don't get involved in any kind of work where they show their opposition.

They remain at that level of existence probably for the rest of their lives. That happens to most of the older people because, whilst you understand you opposing the system, it imposes less sacrifices on you to make, and you continue on your life. Then your level of resistance rises, you get to the stage where you feel you have got to belong to some organisation. And you belong to an organisation which doesn't propagate for that, you've got to bring about change by violent means, or that you can only oppose the state by violence.

You belong to organisations such as SACOS, you belong to other organisations which say that we're got to fight them, but fight them on a basis where they are sanctions; where we boycott certain things; where we educate people; where we address as many meetings as we can. And that is a second level of resistance, as far I'm concerned: you have a placard demonstration, you have a sit-in demonstration. It's the kind of non-violent activity that, like Gandhi preached or certain other people preached.

And eventually you find people saying, those levels of resistance are not attaining any significant, are not making any significant gains. And the only time you will get people to go over to the type of armed struggle that's taking place in South Africa, is if the level of commitment is risen above that. Because why aren't the other people taking up arms; why aren't they doing anything? Because their level of resistance hasn't risen to that level.

I'm saying you've got to educate people; you've got to take them along. If you want them to reach that level, you've got to educate them. In the same way I'm saying, if you want them to recognise that society must be structured on a basis where everyone is equal; where there is no reason to look at someone differently because of his religion, or his cultural beliefs are different; or his skin colour is different. Then you have got to start educating them now.

?Just to take you political development exactly along those lines, you told me about what you did professionally and your education - you were exposed to the TLSA and the Non-European Unity Movement in the 50s and the 60s, and then by the time you started your own working career in the 70s - were you ever a member of the Unity Movement?

YE: Not officially, as a card-carrying member. I've never joined any political movement as a card-carrying member.

?But you supported them?

YE: Oh certainly!

?Yes, but would you say you continued to, or did you move on to other organisations in the country - just tell me a bit about your political development from the days of ...?

YE: Well, in 1960, with the State of Emergency that was imposed, all political movements then found themselves in the situation where their function publicly - they were subject to state repression, the state acted against. So that from 1960, that's what happened to the Unity Movement; it suddenly found itself in a situation where it couldn't operate in public.

So whilst I still had, as my basis, the ideas of the Unity Movement, I found myself in a situation where, whichever organisations I operated in, it was simply with the idea of promoting the broader concept of non-racialism; the idea that exploitation and oppression should be removed from society; that it had to be eliminated from South African society. But it was more than just a question of apartheid being removed: you can remove apartheid and still have oppression and exploitation.

This is what I like to feel that I am propagating at the moment - that society must not simply be free of racism, but it must be free of exploitation and oppression. And that's the concept that I followed. The Unity Movement has resurfaced, I'm not actively involved in the Unity Movement, because my work in SACOS, in the sports organisation, is of such a nature that it's just practically impossible for me to be able to find the time.

Quite honestly I have a lot of sympathy with principles that the organisation espouses.

?The New Unity Movement?

YE: Yes. But I do think that again, it's misreading how to relate that in terms of practical application. I think that one has to recognise that any political movement that wants to be successful, must address itself to the different levels of development of people. And therefore you have to target your campaign to win the minds of people at the various levels.

Just illustrated by someone in the conference over the past two days who said that, "You've got to tone your language to the people you're addressing. You can't speak to a knitting club of ladies" Sorry, I'm not being sexist, but I'm using it as an example, "You can't address them in the same language that you would address a militant group of youth" The knitting ladies would close their minds to what you're saying; they would act revolt at what you're saying. The you youth could address differently.

And I think that is something that political movements have to, if they are going to win support. Regrettably, the Unity Movement has some difficulty in addressing that problem. What the precise reasons are I am not able to say, but it has that difficulty.

?But tell me about, just to follow up, you haven't been involved with APDUSA, or the Unity Movement at all?

YE: No.

?Or have you gone to meetings?

YE: I been at some of it's public meetings. In fact, I was a speaker at a few of its public meetings, but I'm not directly involved in its work at the moment.

?And have you been involved with any UDF affiliates?

YE: In the same way that on a sports basis we've had contact with UDF affiliates. In fact, I will make that very clear, that inside SACOS at the moment, we will be involved in the activities of any progressive political tendency, because in SACOS we have people with different progressive political tendencies. It's not a question of subscribing to one particular tendency.

?But SACOS isn't a UDF affiliate?

YE: No.

?Has that ever been put to the vote?

YE: No. The question has been raised recently. We've been asked to look at whether we should align ourselves with a particular political tendency, not affiliate, but whether we should align, or work more closely with. That is going to be discussed, but thus far SACOS has made it very, very clear that it has to remain non-aligned if it is going to retain all it's members, if it is not going to create divisions.

And I think thus far, that has been one of the reasons why it has been able to win people over. But if it were to align itself, if it were to affiliate, it may find that it may be loosing a lot of its members, or rather, a fair number.

?Okay, can you take me back to how you got involved with SACOS? Are you a sports person from way back?

YE: Yes. I like what many people think. Most of the people involved in SACOS were active sports people at some stage or another. My first year at university I started playing cricket for a club, strangely called the Trafalgar Cricket Club, oh sorry, my apologies, the first club I played for was called the Glenville Cricket Club, sorry. I then moved from there to another club called St John Cricket Club, where I played.

And I played cricket for a few years, and then when I eventually qualified as an attorney, I found that I was working Saturdays. I could unfortunately not continue playing cricket. And there was a period during which I didn't play any sport at all, except the occasional game of

table tennis at home, which wasn't much.

Now, I have got to try and think what year it was. I think it was around about 1975, or '75 or '74, when I moved to Heathfield. I felt I wanted to get back into sport, because the pressures of office were of such a nature that I found I needed something which would get me to relax. There was a tennis club in the area, and I then joined the tennis club.

I played for the club from that period. Do you want to know how I developed from there?

?Ja, more into the political SACOS?

YE: I eventually became chairman of the club, that led to me becoming, or even prior to that, becoming a delegate to the union meetings.

?Unions?

YE: The Western Province Tennis Union. And then I was eventually persuaded to become President of the Western Province Tennis Union, which I did. From there I became involved with the Western Province Council of Sport. I became a delegate to SACOS conferences from the Western Province Council of Sport, and I think it's 1978, if I'm not mistaken, whilst I was a delegate from the Western Province Council of Sport to SACOS, I became much more intimately involved in the work of SACOS.

I found, as delegate, that I was being drawn more closely into the organisation. Now, I'm sorry, I'm not very good at dates, you'll have to forgive me - I've got to work back now - '87 we had a BGM, '85 we had a BGM, and '83.

?You had a what?

YE: BGM. Bi-annual General Meetings.

?Ah ha?

YE: I remained a delegate from the Western Province Council of Sport from about '78 until '83, if I'm not mistaken. During that period I also became the chairman of the Western Province Council of Sport.

?It's of not on?

YE: Ja, it's different, for some reason it's different.

?What do you mean it's different?

YE: The one is of, that the Council of Sport, and SACOS is the South African Council on Sport. Around about that time, I

also became involved in the table tennis union. I became Chairman of the Western Province Table Tennis Union, but in '82, I think it is, I no longer served as the Chairman of the Western Province Council of Sport. In '83, at the Bi-annual General Meeting, I was elected as vice-president of SACOS. I am still chairman of the Western Province Table Tennis Union, and I am still President of the Western Province Tennis Union. Since '83, I've been the vice-president - so that's four years now.

?So you went into sport for purely sports motives, but you ended up getting involved in SACOS, which you would say is a political organisation?

YE: I would say SACOS is clearly a sports organisation which recognises the fact that in the South African situation, politics plays an extremely important role. Primarily it's a sports organisation and not a political movement, in the same way that the Unity Movement, or the ANC, or the PAC, is. But our outlook is directly influenced by the political situation in South Africa, so we can't look at sport in isolation. It has to take cognisance of, and it has to deal with the political realities that exist, and the political policies of the South African government.

?I see. Tell me how the politics aspect evolved for you. As I said, you got involved, just because you wanted some sports activity, but can you tell me anything about your commitment to non-racial sport? What does that mean? Can we take it back and let me ask you when you first remember hearing this word non-racialism, and what it means in practise?

YE: Well, non-racialism, I got to hear of that at high school already. It was a concept which was propagated by the Unity Movement at that stage. I was then exposed to that, I was exposed to the policy of non-collaboration, which is something the Unity Movement also subscribed to.

And when I became involved in the Western Province Council of Sport, I was asked to do an introduction of the use of sports facilities at universities. And I did some research on that and presented a paper in terms of which the Western Province Council of Sport accepted that it was very necessary to draw a clear distinction between racial sport and non-racial sport on university campuses.

Now, let me say that I didn't introduce the concept of non-racialism to SACOS, that had been there already by the time I got there. It had been propagated by a number of people before that, so it was a concept that I found in the organisation, and a concept I readily identified with.

This paper on universities helped in getting me to realise that sport could not be viewed in isolation: either from the

rest of society, or from the broader political society as it exists in South Africa. And that whetted my appetite for wanting to get more closely involved with the whole question of seeing how politics influences sport. And that's primarily how I started off there.

?And what does it mean it practise? Do you play non-racial sport and what does that mean?

YE: Well, it means, first of all that when an individual wants to join one of our clubs, we expect that individual to subscribe to the concept that there was no such things as different races, that there is only one race, the human race; that furthermore, that individual will not practise discrimination of any kind, whether on the basis of a person's colour of his skin, or cultural activities, or a person's status in life - economic basis - in fact on any basis - sexism, any other kind of discrimination one can think of, that you will accept anyone as being equal to yourself.

And that is what we expect of our members. We don't expect that people all understand those concepts immediately so what we have tried to undertake over the years is an educational process, or instituted an educational process, in terms of which we have had various workshops; we've had discussions; we've had talks - to try and explain to people exactly what non-racialism means, because unfortunately, a lot of people speak about non-racialism in the same breath as they speak of multi-racialism.

Now the two are quite opposite, as the particular phrase indicate; non-racialism means no races; multi-racialism means many races. We subscribe to the concept that there are no races in the world, as I have stressed time and time again. I'm trying to think of perhaps, a very practical way to illustrate that.

If I were to say to someone that, if you look at the animal kingdom, you will see that physiologically and biologically, there are differences in the animal kingdom - an alligator is simply not the same as a monkey. Alright? A fish isn't the same as a snake, or perhaps snake is not a good example; as a chicken, or something like a bird. But amongst human beings, there might be differences on the exterior, but dissect them and you are going to find the same physiological make-up as you would in any other human being throughout the whole world.

In the animal kingdom, you certainly find differences. Now why should we then say that people are of different races. The whole concept of race indicates that there is something fundamentally different between people: that there is the so-called Aboriginal race; the so-called Aryan race. Hitler

tried that - he tried to show that the so-called Aryan race was superior to the rest of the world. It was destroyed - that concept.

Leading social scientists have shown that the concept that people of different races are different; that they have different levels of development; that they have different physical capabilities; that there are other differences - that has been scientifically shown as being nonsense. Now why should we perpetuate that idea?

?Sure. I thought you were going to give me another example from the sports field?

YE: Oh! I can give you a number of examples from the sports field. Take the Olympics which were held in Berlin, where Hitler was very keen to demonstrate to the rest of the world just how superior the so-called Aryan race was. If you remember Jesse Owens who was a so-called Negro from America had the distinction of winning three gold medals: the 100 yards; the 200 yards; and I think the 400 yards. Now he demonstrated, very forcibly, the fact there was no difference between him.

Look at the modern situation - over the years boxing, for example, has always portrayed, so-called whites, people with fair skins, as being the best boxers. Look at the situation now - if you were racist on the other side, you could say that the blacks are certainly superior, because they seem to be dominating most of the codes.

But what we are saying, we're not saying that - we're saying that, given the same opportunities, given the same facilities, that people can all perform equally, or reach certain levels, irrespective of what the colour of their skin is; irrespective of which country they come from; irrespective of what the cultural backgrounds are.

The United Nations might be a good example in that respect - you have people who are diplomats there, that come from various countries, all the countries in the world. They debate equally, they are all able to reason equally - the only difference is on your level of education. The type of stimulus you've been exposed to, and your own ability to use the resources you have within yourself to reach particular levels.

?And what does that mean in South Africa, in the Western Province Council of Sport, that you have been involved in - do your sporting events include people of all races, or do you tend, in the Cape, in the SACOS groups in the Cape to have mainly people from the coloured community, for historical reasons, or is that ...?

YE: No. I suppose, if one is going to look at it from a racial classification point of view, then obviously, there are less so-called Africans in sports codes. The reasons for that is, for a multiplicity of reasons - one of them is, that the Group Areas Act has effectively divided people up. Secondly, there is the fact that people who stay in the poorer areas are, unfortunately, the so-called Africans, and that's because of the political economic policy followed by South Africa. So you find it is difficult for them to be able to afford the same kind of standards, financially, that the so-called coloureds are able to afford.

So we have this difficulty - for example, if we have sports activities that it's not easy for so-called Africans to travel to the various places where we have to play. Our sports activities in the Western Cape stretches over quite a wide area. Those who are more privileged have the motor cars, and we've got that problem.

Added to that is the fact that the government has over the years indoctrinated people into getting them to think that the so-called coloureds are going to mislead the so-called Africans - it creates that kind of problem. Now these are barriers that we are trying to break down. It's become more effect of late, I think where people have now accepted that there is no question of anyone dominating anyone else.

It's a question, I think, of recognising again, the abilities of each individual, and we've tried - in tennis, for example. Tennis operates on the basis where it has clubs from the township; the difficulty that they are confronted with is the lack of facilities. And in two particular cases, the courts have been destroyed - in one case by a motor car running down the fence. The local authorities won't erect a fence: they are telling the club they have to do it. People haven't got the money to erect that, so the club becomes defunct.

Table-tennis, we've got a club operating there. Again, it's a question of facilities - they don't have the facilities. Table-tennis bats have become an expensive items, they cost R200 / R300. How does a person earning something like a R100 a month, R150 a month afford that kind of equipment. Now the sports that people can participate in, perhaps a little more freely are soccer, netball - that kind of thing.

Soccer has become a problem in that, the National Social League, which is not affiliated to SACOS, has gained all the money. It gets all the major sponsorship, so unfortunately, people flock to them. So it's not just a question of there being a division between people as a result of some racial classification. There are a number of factors.

Rugby has made inroads where it draws big crowds; it draws

big support; cricket is busy with a programme; table-tennis - tennis - all busy with that in fact; volley ball is busy with a programme ... ?

?What do you mean by, "busy with a programme"?

YE: Well, trying to get people from the townships to become more closely involve in the codes of sports. People from outside the townships to go into the townships in order to cement relations. Schools are busy with that programme also, the schools organisations.

?Through SACOS?

YE: Yes. So those are things that we are busy undertaking. We, in fact, have been very fortunate in being told by the National Union of Mine Workers that they are keen to undertake a joint programme with us, to get mine workers to play non-racial sport. I don't want to sound as if we have all the answers - we don't. We are confronted by a number of problems, but the one thing that we do have is recognition from just about all the organisations in the country, that they would like their members to play non-racial sport.

?What organisations in the country?

YE: The trade unions.

?Oh the political ones?

YE: The political mass-based movements, church groups, cultural groups - everyone. But the problem they are confronted with is, to break the strangle-hold of the sports codes that have the backing of the multi-national corporations, where money is being circulated. How do you tell people, for example who play in the National Soccer League, who support the National Soccer League, that we can offer something comparable, when we can't? How do you get them to break away from that? It's an educational process which has to take place.

And I think people are grossly unfair when they point a finger at us and say that we are doing nothing. We were established in 1973: that's 14 years. It's a centimetre in the lifespan of the struggle - when the organisations have been around for decades and have still found that there are tremendous problems. So we're saying give us just a short space of time, and I'm sure that we can make great inroads. But it has to be a joint effort - there is no question about that.

?Joint effort? Between?

YE: Trade unions, with progressive political organisations, community, church organisations, etc.

?Would you see the sports field, where the organisations around sports, as resistance, as changing South Africa?

YE: Oh, there is no doubt about that. If you look at the situation, as it was, prior to 1973, or 1970, or earlier, and you look at the situation now - I think clearly there's a difference.

?Can you give me a concrete example of some experience you've had being involved in SACOS sport that's made you feel that this is the way the future South Africa will be, or this is building non-racialism, or this is an important facet of resistance, of change?

YE: Hm. There are various ones. The sports festival we had in 1982 which drew a number of people in support of it. That was an important occasion. The number of times we've been able to address schools, we've been able to address meetings where we've gotten support - the facts that I was detained for 25 days in 1985 because of my sports activities, was a great source of encouragement to me, because I asked myself the question: if you have to be detained for your sports activities, then surely the South African government must be fearing the kind of sports politics we are preaching.

The fact that a number of our administrators, and sports persons are harassed by the police, harassed by the system - those are sources of encouragement to one because it makes you realise that they really do fear the sports movement. The fact that they have had to make continuous adjustments in their sports policies - those are all factors which give one encouragement.

?Why were you detained, do you think? What did they ask you, did they interrogate you at all?

YE: They interrogated me on the question of whether I was involved in initiating the campaign against the All Blacks, they generally wanted to know about SACOS, why we felt that we couldn't participate in the existing sports structures. They questioned me about all these sports documents I had with me, whether I assisted in drafting the constitution of clubs, whether I had assisted in drafting statements that were issued, and that kind of thing. Generally they were concerned about the fact that they felt that SACOS was taking too high a political profile.

?Okay. Was that the only time you have been detained, in 1985?

YE: Yes.

?And can I just ask you, Heathfield, where you live, what kind of area is that classified?

YE: It's a so-called coloured area.

?And your wife is classified?

YE: As coloured.

?Okay. What faith did you grow up in?

YE: The Islamic faith. I think when one goes on, well, I play tennis - I think when you find that you go onto a tennis court and you see individuals there who, not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense, embrace one another as equals; when you go to a tournament, or a meeting and you find that each one is looking at each other, simply, for the kind of contribution you can make. And you don't look at the individual, as if you asking yourself now, first of all, is there a difference between him and myself because of the colour of his skin, or the type of hair that he has, or his physical features, but all you're asking yourself is, whether in fact, you are on the same wave length in regard to what you believe in, and when you see that some of the misconceptions you've had about people; and quite honestly, some of the latent prejudices that you've had, that have built up over the years, have no foundations whatsoever, then it makes you realise that you can't ever accept that, to say that there are people of different races, and that there are different, that can ever be justified.

Some of the examples, for instance, you find that with conferences, such as these, with sports functions, you start speaking to people, and it's suddenly brought home very forcibly to you that you all have the same kind of aspirations, you have the same kind of ideals, you experience similar kinds of problems, and in many cases you have very similar outlooks on various things. And you then, not that you need reinforcement, but it does reinforce your whole idea that the whole concept of non-racialism must be correct.

If ever you've had any doubt that people do look at themselves different, that isn't there something which makes people different, then suddenly you realise that isn't so. I must be honest at the beginning, when I started off, I thought that I wasn't the equal of whites, to be very honest. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't, and perhaps my profession has helped me in that way - that I found that when I go to court, I look upon the chap on the other side, as an opponent, obviously in regard to my legal work, but when I find that I can win a case on the basis of the argument I present, again as I say, if I needed any kind of reinforcement, it reinforces to me that I am capable of

being equal to someone else.

Now, on the sports field the one thing that strikes you very forcibly is, that unless you're really practised your particular code of sport; unless you've dedicated yourself to it, simply because you're of lighter skin colour does not mean that you can go out there and have the better of someone who's black. In fact, it comes down basically to the same thing - you've got to dedicate yourself in the same way that everyone else has to. I think it's that type of thing that makes one realise that there's a lot of satisfaction, if you need that, that one gets out of this kind of work.

END OF TAPE