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The Reappearance of the Khoesan in Post-Apartheid South Africa

François-Xavier Fauvelle

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**TEN YEARS OF
DEMOCRATIC
SOUTH AFRICA
TRANSITION
ACCOMPLISHED?**

BY

AURELIA WA KABWE-SEGATTI,

NICOLAS PEJOUT

AND PHILIPPE GUILLAUME

Les Nouveaux Cahiers de l'IFAS / IFAS Working Paper Series is a series of occasional working papers, dedicated to disseminating research in the social and human sciences on Southern Africa.

Under the supervision of appointed editors, each issue covers a specific theme; papers originate from researchers, experts or post-graduate students from France, Europe or Southern Africa with an interest in the region.

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IFAS – Research
PO Box 542 – Newtown 2113
Johannesburg – RSA
Tel: +27 (0)11 836 0561
Fax: +27 (0)11 836 5850
Email: secretariatrecherche@ifas.org.za

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SUMMARY

For the past ten years, South Africa has been progressively coming out of the apartheid system. Although all ties with the former regime have been severed completely, managing the heavy structural legacy has made the transition a difficult as well as an ambivalent process - difficult because the expectations of the population contrast with the complexity of the stakes which have to be dealt with; and ambivalent because the transition is based on innovations as well as continuities.

The contributions gathered in this book will try to clarify the trajectory of that transition. Offered analyses share a critical look, without complacency nor contempt, on the transformations at work. Crossing disciplines and dealing with South Africa as an ordinary and standardised country that can no longer be qualified as being a “miracle” or an “exception”, gives us an opportunity to address themes that are essential to understanding post-apartheid society: land reforms, immigration policies, educational reforms, AIDS...

This issue of IFAS Working Papers is the translation of a book published with Karthala publishers to celebrate 10 years of the Research section of the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) and to highlight its major contribution to constructing francophone knowledge on Southern Africa.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis dix ans, l'Afrique du Sud sort progressivement du système d'apartheid : si les ruptures avec l'ancien régime sont nettes, la gestion d'un héritage structurel lourd rend cette transition à la fois difficile et ambivalente. Difficile car les attentes de la population contrastent avec la complexité des enjeux à traiter. Ambivalente car cette transition est faite d'innovations et de continuités.

C'est cette trajectoire que les contributions réunies ici tentent d'éclairer. Les analyses proposées partagent un regard critique sans complaisance ni mépris sur les transformations à l'œuvre. Le croisement des disciplines et le traitement de l'Afrique du Sud comme un pays ordinaire, normalisé, sorti des paradigmes du « miracle » ou de l'« exception », donnent l'occasion d'aborder des thèmes essentiels à la compréhension de la société post-apartheid : réforme agraire, politique d'immigration, réformes éducatives, sida...

Ces Cahiers sont la traduction d'un ouvrage paru chez Karthala en 2004 à l'occasion des dix ans d'existence du pôle recherche de l'Institut Français d'Afrique du Sud (IFAS) afin de souligner sa contribution majeure à la construction des savoirs francophones sur l'Afrique australe.

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chapter seven

the reappearance
of the khoesan in
post-apartheid
south africa

invention of tradition and national reconciliation

françois-xavier fauvelle-aymar

ABSTRACT

The return of Sarah Baartman's remains to South Africa in August 2002 has largely contributed to the reappearance of Khoesan identity claims and related issues. Illustrating the dynamics of identity crafting enabled by the end of apartheid, the new political consideration given to the Khoesan populations gives South Africa the opportunity to lay rather uncontentious historical foundations for the triple enterprise of reconciling the nation, establishing a collective memory and, in fine, hastening the building of a new nation.

RÉSUMÉ

Le rapatriement des restes de Sarah Baartman vers l'Afrique du Sud en août 2002 a largement contribué à la réapparition des revendications identitaires Khoesan et de questions apparentées. Illustrant les dynamiques de bricolage identitaire rendues possibles par la fin de l'apartheid, le renouveau d'attention politique accordée aux populations Khoesan donne à l'Afrique du Sud une possibilité de creuser les fondements historiques consensuels d'une triple entreprise de réconciliation nationale, d'érection de la mémoire collective et, in fine, d'accélération de la construction nationale.

RELIQS OF SARAH BAARTMAN

On 9 August, 2002 (declared International Day of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations and also National Women's Day in South Africa), the remains of Sarah (Saartje) Baartman were buried in Hankey, a small town in the Eastern Cape Province, close to the Gamtoos River. The major news agencies were present to cover the ceremony which was being broadcast live on South African television. The event was of great political importance, as it was attended not only by various local authorities, but also by President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki; ex-President Nelson Mandela, and several ministers. The speeches made by politicians, and ministers and the poetic orations delivered in the raging wind under the winter sun, before thousands of people¹ gathered on the hill, placed the ceremony under various banners: national reconciliation, evocation of a colonial past, a tribute to women, and religious ecumenism. While Sarah Baartman received a state funeral, as testified by the draping of the South-African flag over the coffin, the event went hand-in-hand with another ceremony—attracting no less media attention – orchestrated the previous day by several dignitaries of various “tribes”, some wearing the sheep-skin kaross (cloak), others a leopard skin stole,

¹ 7 000 according to the AFP, 10 000 according to Reuters.

burning grasses and scattering *buchu* (aromatic shrubs) onto the deceased woman's bones. As such, and to use the words of a French daily newspaper at the time, the events unfolded "according to tradition" to the sound of "traditional" drums².

Sarah Baartman, christened "The Hottentot Venus" in the 1810s, did not die days before the ceremony, but almost two hundred years earlier in Paris, on New Year's Day, 1816³, after spending several years in Britain and France where she had been exhibited on stage, causing a popular and scientific stir⁴. When she died, far from her native Cape colony, her body was cast in plaster then dissected by Georges Cuvier (1817), famous anatomist of the time. The cast and reassembled skeleton remained on display at the Museum of Mankind in Paris up until the 1970s, with various sections of soft tissue (brain, fatty deposits of the buttocks and genitals) which were carefully preserved in jars of formalin.

A few months before the funeral, a South African delegation had gone to France (29 April 2002) to collect the remains and accompany them from Paris to the Cape, where they were greeted with solemnity (3 May), before being taken to Port-Elizabeth to be feted by local authorities (8 August) and finding their last resting place. One imagines this route to be similar to that taken by Sarah Baartman herself, from her birthplace in the Eastern Cape, to Cape Town, then to London and Paris. At every stage of this commemorative journey, one could witness a great deployment of symbols and displays of official presence, with schoolchildren acting as guards of honour. The staging or, rather, superimposed stagings of the transfer of the remains and the funeral evoke the translation of relics in Medieval Europe. They are reminiscent of the re-appropriation, by the South African nation, of the body of a saint or martyr whose remains are endowed with a strong identity-related power, as was the case, in the Middle Ages for monastic communities and villagers.

■ THE AFFAIR OF THE HOTTENTOT VENUS AND THE HESITATIONS CREATED

The transference of the relics of Sarah Baartman to what is both her birth and final resting place, occurred after a media frenzy took hold of the South African press in the mid 1990s,

² F. Pompey, 2002, "Victime de deux siècles de colonisation, Saartje Baartman repose en paix", *Le Monde*, 9th August. See also the Reuters agency story (Mike Hutchings), Friday 9th August 2002, 5.02pm.

³ Or maybe the 29th December 1815; sources diverge on this point.

⁴ On the story of Sarah Baartman, see amongst others B. Lindfors (1983); B. Lindfors (1985); Z. Strother (1999); G. Badou (2000); F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar (2003), as well as the documentary film by Z. Maseko (1998).

the aim of which was to have the remains returned from France. In short, the Sarah Baartman “affair” had been an implicit presence throughout the history of the “new” South Africa or, rather, the illustration of certain tensions at work in the recent history of the country that, as we shall see, are found within the longer history of exchanges between South Africa and Europe.

At first, the French scientific and museum authorities hesitated over the idea of returning the remains and pretended that the jars had been accidentally destroyed by a collapsing shelf⁵. This led to a French political and media battle between the partisans of the Museum of Mankind, stripped of its ethnographic collections, and those of the Museum of Primitive Arts at Quai Branly, more than happy at the opportunity to have the Trocadero museum regarded as a dusty institution preciously guarding its collections of dubiously acquired skulls. This perhaps apocryphal remark, attributed to one of the protagonists of the affair, sums up rather appropriately the French mood at the time: “If we return the Hottentot Venus, we will also have to return the Venus de Milo”. This sentence, quite unintentionally, reminds us that Sarah Baartman was ironically given the name of Venus (and what is more, “steatopygous”, meaning “having protuberant buttocks”) after that given to many Greek statues referred to as “callipygous” (“having well-shaped buttocks”). This remark expressed also the reservations of French cultural and political authorities, apprehensive about the increasingly frequent demands made to ex-colonial powers to return cultural or anthropological artefacts. In the end, and as a result of the way the affair turned out, the situation required passing a law that was unanimously voted on the French Senate’s initiative. It stipulated, in a single article, that “as from the date at which this law comes into force, the mortal remains of the person known as Saartjie⁶ Baartman cease to be part of the collections of the public establishment of the National Museum of Natural History⁷. The administrative authority has, as from the same date, a period of two months to return the remains to the Republic of South Africa”⁸.

More difficult to understand, however, are the hesitations expressed at the beginning of the affair by the authorities of the Republic of South Africa that secretly made it clear that they preferred it not to attract too much publicity. This paradox, made all the more obvious by the fact that readers of the South African press were encouraged to believe that France’s opposition was the only obstacle to a restitution, might be explained by the desire to avoid creating a contentious diplomatic situation with France over such a minor disagreement.

⁵ See the *Monde*’s “Une” centre spread, 30 January 2002.

⁶ Saartjie is the standard Afrikaans spelling used today. In Dutch, the diminutive is spelt –tje. The Baptismal certificate, dated the 7th December 1811 in Manchester, carries the name Sarah.

⁷ The regulating body of the Museum of Mankind.

⁸ Law N° 2002-323 of 6 March 2002. Published in Journal officiel N° 56 of 7 March 2002, p.4265.

However, as we shall see, the discomfort of the South African authorities, as well as the late “hijacking” of the affair, are evidence of deeper cultural and ideological issues.

■ APPEARANCE (OR REAPPEARANCE) OF THE KHOESAN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The mention of “traditional Khoesan authorities” and “royal Khoesan families” in the speeches delivered during Sarah Baartman’s funeral as well as the strong accent placed on tradition celebrated the return to dignity of a people whose identity and culture were believed to have vanished, and who, on this and other occasions, is asserting the continuity of its practices and sense of belonging from pre-colonial to post-apartheid era.

Yet, the name “Khoesan”, adopted over the last few years by indigenist groups and associations that petitioned to see the return of the remains of a person they consider as an ancestor, is a new addition to the landscape of South African identity. Until recently, the word was only employed in a strictly scientific context. Leonard Schultze, a German biometrician, created the word (then spelt *Koisan*) in 1928 to group together two populations considered at the time to be somatically distinct (the “Hottentots” or Khoekhoe and the “Bushmen” or San). Its meaning later widened to include a cultural content, thus regrouping the beliefs, practices and social organisation of both hunter-gatherers and herders of Southern African (Schapera 1930 ; Barnard 1992). The most unambiguous meaning of the word Khoisan is its linguistic sense, since it applies to a family of languages, created by American linguist Joseph Greenberg, grouping together all click-containing non-Bantu languages of Southern Africa (Greenberg 1963). The written form “Khoesan” has recently become widespread. Despite the word’s history, going back more than seventy years already, its use is new in the South African identity landscape in that never before in history have people claimed to be “Khoesan”. Beyond the word itself, the shaping of a same “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) is also a very recent phenomenon: indeed, it is only since the time of the Hottentot Venus affair that one can speak of the appearance of an identity mentally unifying extremely diverse groups who had, until then, never considered sharing the same history nor presenting a united front.

Archaeologically characterised by a so-called *Late Stone Age* material culture (presence of reinforced hunting weapons made from chipped stone, etc.), the Khoesan represented the founding populations of Southern Africa. Khoesan populations are those with whom Bantuphone agricultural populations, who progressively populated the eastern half of

Southern Africa at the dawn of the Christian era, and with whom, at a later stage, immigrants of European origin who established the Cape colony in 1652 and continued to advance northwards and to the East right up until the 19th century, came into contact. Despite the lack of a *lived* common history, the shared destiny of the different Khoesan groups over the last two millennia in the face of successive waves of immigrants is probably the most important factor explaining the recent emergence – or rather, the progressive emergence – of a collective identity. Indeed, over the last 2000 years, the Khoesan practically disappeared from the whole of Southern Africa only to survive at the heart of the sub-continent – the Kalahari Desert and its western margins (Western Botswana and Eastern Namibia). This progressive confinement led to the image, in the western mind, of a people preserved in its splendid natural sanctuary, when in fact, it appears that this area is more likely the only area that late-coming Blacks and Whites were unable to confiscate entirely and from which they failed to dislodge its inhabitants (Fauvelle-Aymar 2004, to be published). Khoesan history is a long history of spatial marginalisation echoing the equally long history of their depreciation in the eyes of others, of all others. Carrying the stigma of their physical appearance (small size, skin colour described as yellow, number of anatomical particularities such as steatopygia and macromyphia⁹), their organisation into fragmented societies or bands, their predation (and not production) based economies, or still their languages which have been compared to the clucking of chickens and said to be unpronounceable, the Khoesan were often relegated to the edges of humanity, to the animal world, as “things of the bush”¹⁰. The history of how the Khoesan are seen in the West is that of the invention of a category of population that acts as a hinge between mankind and other living things (Fauvelle-Aymar 2002). This negative image, which places all the groups in the same mental sack, strongly contributed to the creation of the descriptive category “Khoesan” which today, turned inside out like a glove, finds itself re-used in a positive sense.

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE KHOESAN DURING COLONISATION AND SEGREGATION

There is no doubt that the massacres perpetrated by the newcomers and the diseases they carried were among the main causes of the disappearance of the Khoesan from a large part of Southern Africa. However, to this physical disappearance we must also add more underground phenomena contributing to social disappearance, such as the absorption of individuals or

⁹ Steatopygia is the accumulation of fat on the buttocks. Macromyphia is the natural elongation of the labia in some women, usually occurring after the first pregnancy; travellers called this unique characteristic the “Hottentot apron”.

¹⁰ We refer to the title of J. Suzman’s book (2000), an excellent description of the condition of Namibian Bushmen today.

segments of Khoesan society into the new populations. The intermarriage and integration of conquered Khoesan lineages or clients from Bantu-speaking agricultural chieftainships, Xhosa in particular, are confirmed in written European sources dating from the 17th - 18th centuries as well as oral sources collected among Bantuphone populations (Peires 1981). It is highly probable that these processes occurred throughout the last two thousand years, judging by the genetic gradient that the sum of African populations in Southern Africa represent and by the presence of clicks in nearly every Bantu language in South Africa, with a greater proportion within the Nguni language group¹¹.

These various factors also contributed to the physical and social disappearance of the Khoesan within South Africa itself, with a force increased tenfold by the colonial context and extreme brutality of the relations of domination. The diseases brought by the colonisers, beginning with the great smallpox of 1713 that decimated the African population of the Colony, ended a process begun at the dawn of colonisation that weakened and led to the destruction of Khoesan societies (Elphick 1977: 217-239). Bushmen massacres perpetrated in the 18th and 19th centuries by commandos of white farmers and Hottentot auxiliaries (Penn 1996), coupled with the practice of abducting women and children, accelerated the destruction of African societies and the absorption of the Khoesan into a rural sub-proletariat made up in equal measure of the descendants of slaves and Coloureds of all backgrounds.

Categorising the population into racial groups and implementing segregation at the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries signed the legal disappearance of the Khoesan who were, from then on, classified *Coloured* within the colonial population. The same appears to be true at cultural level: the last evidence of the material culture characterising “archaeological” Khoesan people disappeared from South Africa in the 19th century. As for the last speakers of Khoesan languages, with the exception of a few Nama speakers in the most isolated parts of Namaqualand, they disappeared in the first decades of the 20th century, ending a process of linguistic destruction begun in the 17th century. Already by the end of the 18th century, the Khoekhoe language was only spoken in the remotest eastern districts of the colony (Traill 2002). Khoesan beliefs and religious practices – to stick to the most striking cultural aspects – also disappeared in the 19th century under missionary influence. Indeed, the disappearance of Khoesan culture stems as much from the physical annihilation of communities – some have spoken of genocide (Gordon 1998) – as from the destruction of social ties transforming the status and experienced life condition of individuals, forcing them to take on new forms of sociability as well as new identities. Therefore it should not come as a surprise if linguistic elements,

¹¹ See the genetic distribution map in P.V. Tobias (1974: 26). On the clicks in Bantu languages, see R.K. Herbert (2002).

spatial organisation and culinary practices inherited from Khoesan culture should make the odd appearance in *coloured*, Christian and Afrikaanophone cultures; the same should be true, to varying degrees, for Afrikaner culture. Given the long term impact of colonialism, marked by the harshness of group and individual relationships as much as cultural hybridisation, the existence of elements of Khoesan origin within the culture of any group should not lead one to speak too hastily of the “survival” of certain aspects, the cultural and social significance of which would have been maintained through the centuries. In any case, concluding the disappearance of the Khoesan at the beginning of democratic South Africa seemed so certain that anthropologists, observing the first manifestations of a collective Nama consciousness in the north-west of the country, and refusing to give in to the romantic notion of the return of the Khoesan after centuries of silence, preferred to speak of “ethnogenesis” and put the accent on what they called the “performance” of ethnicity (Sharp & Boonzaier 1994).

■ IMPACT OF A RE-INVENTED TRADITION ON IDENTITY

The fact that the funeral of Sarah Baartman “played” on ethnicity leaves no doubt, as long as one accepts the politically incorrect dimension of such an assertion that should not, however, lead one to doubt the authenticity of the sense of “Khoesan” belonging currently being forged. “To be Khoesan”, as said earlier, is *beginning* to make sense. But what does this sudden awareness mean, considering that its only political motivation was a petition requesting that France return a skeleton and a few human preserves?

Faced with the deployment of “traditional” Khoesan symbols and rituals during the funeral, should we speak of the invention of a tradition (Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983) or the re-awakening of a community consciousness that was simply asleep or in a lull? The answer to this classic question highlights a number of interesting phenomena.

Firstly, it should not come as a surprise that the neo-Khoesan are playing the indigenist card. Their case is similar to that of the Wampanoag Indians studied by James Clifford who, although Americans in every respect, found themselves compelled to *prove* their Indian identity, i.e. to prove that they continued exercising Indian practices and beliefs, in order to assert their land claims (Clifford 1988). Evidence used to prove one’s identity in both legal and media investigations as far as authenticating a claim is concerned, is of a cultural order. A sense of belonging (to be Indian, to be Khoesan) – particularly when it is recent – is of course less valid than all the “traditional” baggage of a culture, such as “tribal” councils, the fineries of “chiefs”, “time-honoured” rituals and the use of “indigenous” plants, even when it is

resurfacing after two hundred years of absence. Similarly, neither should it come as a surprise that the traditional apparel mobilised in the case of the Khoesan does not come from a well identified homogenous “culture”, but from a symbolic mixture associating elements belonging to different past ethnic groups, drawn from anthropological literature in all probability. As such, we are faced with the well-known phenomenon of cultural invention not to be taken literally when the work of researchers *on* “indigenous” populations act as reference for the cultural discourse produced *by* so-called “indigenous” populations.

As already mentioned, the Sarah Baartman affair was a mere catalyst for an identity-related mobilisation synchronous with the short history of post-apartheid South Africa. While segregation and apartheid imposed a racial framework in which white ancestry was valued to the detriment of African ancestry, the transition to democracy allowed an entire range of identities to be expressed. From now on, any genealogical “fiddling” is possible, including that, no less legitimate than former ones, giving precedence to African over European ancestry. The arrival of South Africa on the global ideological scene whereby “anteriority takes precedence” and burgeoning “natives” and “original peoples” are protected by UN charters, could only favour this trend. In South Africa, the first to benefit from anteriority and claiming to be “Khoesan” are those for whom it is symbolically the least expensive, in other words those who, within a very stratified coloured community, found themselves socially marginalised during the years of segregation.

JUDICIOUS USE OF AN INCOMPLETE BIOGRAPHY

As in the case of medieval relics, the remains of the unfortunate woman known as the “Hottentot Venus” come with a story. Just as with the *vitae* of medieval saints, the story becomes exaggerated, distorted even by rumours and legends or, in this case, by the stories of press agencies and the shortcuts of publicists and politicians refashioning them to fit current issues.

It is said that Sarah Baartman was born in Hankey in 1789 into a family of Khoekhoe herders belonging to a certain “tribe”; that she was torn from her traditional way of life by a Boer farmer who enslaved her to make her his servant in the Cape; that, taken against her will to Great Britain, she was exhibited in a cage as both a slave and fairground monster; that, later, after being taken under the wing of a French entrepreneur, she briefly created a sensation in France before ending her life as a prostitute on the streets of Paris. In reality, we know almost nothing of Sarah Baartman’s life in the Cape colony, of her youth or her ethnicity, other than

she was born “on the borders of Caffraria”¹², thus designating – albeit rather vaguely – the eastern districts of the Colony. Sarah Baartman’s life in Europe, from the time she became the “Hottentot Venus”, is better documented although major gaps do exist. Thanks to a court case (November 1810) opposing the young woman’s mentor to a group campaigning against illegal slave trade (abolished in 1807), the period of her life about which we know the most is her time spent in London. Sarah Baartman claimed to be 22 years old, that she lived in the Cape with a cooper with whom she had a child (who had died since then), that she came to Europe completely of her own accord, that she was well treated, that she earned half of the takings of the shows and that she has two black children at her service. She said she liked England and did not want for anything in the world to return to her country. No doubt following the bad publicity created by the court case, Sarah and her patron (or should one say associate?) disappeared from the scene, perhaps to tour the United Kingdom. In 1811, she found herself in Manchester where she was baptised in an Anglican church. She resurfaced in Paris in 1814, where she inspired vaudevilles and caricatures. In 1815, she was exhibited in front of an auditorium of learned men at the Jardin du roi (today the Jardin des Plantes)¹³. No doubt she led a miserable life, that of a low grade artist with no status, enjoying an ambiguous yet wholly unsatisfying fame (Fauvelle-Aymar 2003), that of an African woman, quite possibly suffering from a deformation (Regnault 1914)¹⁴ in addition to her well-known steatopygia, and exploited to the point where she contributed to her very own decline (Abrahams 1996).

Was Sarah Baartman a true “Hottentot”, as her nickname suggests and by which she remained known in collective memory? Was she a San (or Bushman), as several learned men sought to establish after her death? These categories, conjured up some two hundred years ago, bear very little meaning and could not be used to determine the identity or identities the young woman may have claimed to be her own. After all, given her poor Dutch (no doubt the dialectal variety of the colony, later to become Afrikaans), the only language she spoke it seems, and considering the little biographical information available on her, one could just as well consider her to be *Coloured*, a category that does not mean much either in the context of the period. Our doubts – the blanks in the story of Sarah Baartman – may come from her inherent ambiguities. These biographical and identity-related uncertainties are precisely what enables geographically-splintered *Coloured* communities with distinct memories today to mobilise consensually, devoid of overtly recognisable cultural pedigree (which they would find difficult to mobilise), devoid of specific geographical anchorage. Thanks to the ambiguities of her biography, Sarah Baartman is able to act as the ancestor of all the “Khoesan”.

¹² Baptismal Certificate. Musée de l’Homme (Paris), photographic library, C-52-495.

¹³ Sources referring to Sarah Baartman’s life have been listed by Z.S. Strother (1999: 55-58). The minutes of the hearing have been published in *ibid.*, p. 41-48.

¹⁴ Many thanks to François Bon (UTAH, University of Toulouse-le-Mirail) for sharing this reference.

Should one be really surprised by this transfer of memory? If, today, Sarah Baartman can help crystallise a Khoesan identity somewhere in Africa, it is indeed because, over the last two hundred years, in the West, whether in the showcase displays of the Museum of Mankind or in anthropology books, she has been incarnating the Khoesan prototype. Her physical characteristics, studied throughout the 19th century, have served after much discussion to calibrate the Hottentot and Bushmen “races”, the merging of which, at the beginning of the 20th century, could be seen as the anthropometric birth certificate of the Khoesan. Moreover, one could say that the body of Sarah Baartman was the “Rosetta stone” of racial anthropology, because of the unique position the Khoesan occupy in Western anthropology, on the fringe of Mankind, a privileged specimen for testing, validating or rejecting paradigms. Cuvier’s dissection report, often quoted to denounce the condescending gaze of European men on the body of an African woman, did confirm that the “Hottentot apron” (elongation of the *labia minora*) was not an additional organ and that Sarah Baartman definitely belonged to the human race. In the 1850s, however, at the height of the polemic between monogenism and polygenism, some believed that Cuvier had fiddled his report so as “not to alarm the monogenists” (Fauvelle-Aymar 1999: 445). The “Sarah Baartman” affair of the 1990s illustrates the poaching of a scientific episode by the collective memory of populations who, today, are using her body in turn to create their own identity.

■ ART OF HANDLING A NATIONAL RECONCILIATION POLICY

Although Great Britain was the destination country where Sarah Baartman had been taken to be exhibited and the country where she had been nicknamed “Hottentot Venus”, it was in France that she spent the last year of her life, the reason why most scientific texts regarding the study of her body were drafted in French. This probably explains why, during the attempt to have the body recovered, France was not only targeted for being in possession of the remains, but also branded as representing the colonial West perpetuating its contempt for Africans, two hundred years later, thanks to the writings of Cuvier and a few others. However, one must point out that the campaign to see the return of the remains of a woman preserved in Paris, coupled with the militant media agitation surrounding it, had the curious effect of occulting the otherwise important role played by first the Dutch then British colonisation in the physical and social decimation of the Khoesan. What of the massacres and kidnappings perpetrated by Boer commandos assisted by half-cast and Hottentot auxiliaries? What of the collusion between the military operations linked to British colonisation and the supply of hundreds of skeletons and stuffed heads to imperial museums (Morris 1996; Legassick & Rassool 2000)? No doubt, one of the most important symbolic benefits of the biography of Sarah Baartman

is that it allows the mobilisation of the neo-Khoesan without stirring Cape colony or South African history in general: in short, it preserves the work of national reconciliation undertaken in the mid-1990s. It is this tactical concession that allowed the South African authorities, more than reticent initially at the agitation caused by the affair, to “hijack” the latter for their benefit as soon as it became clear that France was about to return the remains.

Why such hesitations? Certainly because the return of the Khoesan partly revived old ideological debates from the apartheid era on the anteriority and legitimacy of territorial occupation. Underlying this battle is the dichotomy between Khoesan and Bantu, between two populations seen as fundamentally different, one (Khoesan) forming the substratum of the western half of the country, the other (Bantu) occupying the eastern half. This dichotomy stems from a colonial perception that opposes “Hottentots” and “Kaffirs” (Fauvelle-Aymar 2002: 128-134), which, via racial anthropology, has become so integral to the general discourse within South Africa that no one seems to consider the Khoesan as “Africans”. It is quite striking that even today “African” – synonymous with “Black” – continues to refer exclusively to the country’s Bantuphone populations, particularly in history books. In short, it is as if there existed two completely heterogeneous “Africannesses” in South Africa, when archaeology, linguistics, genetics as well as the history of economic exchanges reveal interactions between these two population groups and even the creation of a population continuum in the long term. This dichotomous vision is shared by all in South Africa, leading to an equally dichotomous vision of the territory, between a once Khoesan west, today in the majority *coloured* and white, and an east that is primarily black.

As a result of this imposed dichotomy and, basically, taking advantage of the rapid disappearance of the Khoesan, ideologists of the apartheid regime were able to claim that European colonisation preceded the arrival of “Africans”, if not over the entire territory, then at least in the western part of the country. In a symptomatic way, anti-apartheid movement discourse surrounding the battle for legitimacy was cast in the same mould, claiming, with the help of arguments provided by liberal archaeologists, that “Africans” had crossed the Limpopo river (in the north-east) well before European settlers landed at the Cape (in the south-west). Yet, somewhere along the way it was forgotten that other Africans were present in the area before Whites arrived. It is as if the anteriority of the Khoesan, who could have supplied very serious arguments to all Africans in the race for symbolic legitimisation, was made ineffective by proving that populating had been discontinued.

With the end of apartheid, Khoesan anteriority became an important instrument at the service of a national reconciliation policy. Universally accepted, declaring the anteriority of a lost people ended the legitimacy dispute opposing Black and White. In short, the Khoesan

became the ancestors of the new South Africa. As it happens, the central design of the South African coat of arms is inspired by Bushman rock paintings, declared “national art”, while the motto, ordering all elements of the country to unite, is based on /Xam, a language that disappeared over a century ago.

The only good ancestors, however, are dead ancestors. Proclaiming Khoesan ancestral descent could have been recognised only if it was understood that no specific group could use it to its advantage in order to declare greater legitimacy over South African territory. The Khoesan had to be “noble” natives who, in having disappeared, transmitted equal rights to all their successors. As such, the emergence of a Khoesan identity during the 1990s threatened this symbolic balance and could have led to new claims by other groups who needed only to play the native card to promote themselves as the “first people”. This situation is rather paradoxical: the government representing the black majority ran the risk of having to rid the country of its macabre colonial heritage through land restitution or financial compensation to populations decimated over the last few hundred years, where such populations had kept a low profile during apartheid but re-emerged suddenly to proclaim their anteriority over all others. But nothing of the sort was to happen. Khoesan mobilisation focused on identity issues and aimed at regaining dignity rather than pushing for other claims. So much so that, once the fears raised at the beginning of the Sarah Baartman affair were laid to rest, South Africans were heard shouting in national unison: “The Khoesan are dead. Long live the Khoesan!”

(Translated by Charlotte Maconochie)

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