

Khoisan Revivalism

The claims of Africa's first indigenous peoples

An unexpected development in post-apartheid South Africa is the revivalism of Khoisan identity, the truly indigenous of the country whose blood flows through many who now know themselves by different names.

Anthea Garman reports.



WHEN THE GOVERNMENT of South Africa released its new Coat of Arms last year two fragile figures from ancient rock art were placed in the centre of the shield and the words "Ke e: /xarra //ke" ("Unity in diversity" in the extinct language /Xam) were placed underneath.

Professor Jatti Bredekamp, a historian at the University of the Western Cape, says of all the changes from old apartheid identity to a new African identity, the Coat of Arms is the only symbol which incorporates the indigenous peoples. But, he says, it is still an important emblem and will have the effect of "changing a nation's consciousness". Khoisan heritage and culture is becoming "more and more pertinent in post-apartheid South Africa".

In the mid-90s there was an emergence of the awareness of Khoisan heritage coinciding with black South African expressions of identity which found a home in the concept of the 'African Renaissance'.

"The Khoisan are not extinct as was believed in the 20th century," he says. The word 'Khoisan' is a deliberate term for the descendants of the first indigenous people of South Africa. It is an anthropological word used first in the mid-20th century for the people formerly known – perjoratively – as 'bushmen' and 'hottentots'. It's a portmanteau term standing for the San – the hunter/gatherers and the Khoi – the herders.

But it was only in the mid-90s that Khoisan descendants began to throw off the apartheid racial classification of 'coloured' (or sometimes 'Griqua' and 'Nama') and adopt the term as a conscious expression of distinct identity.

Bredekamp says the Khoisan are the oldest of the world's indigenous peoples who first came into contact with

Europeans in Africa in the late 15th century.

Critical issues now for those identifying themselves as Khoisan are the right to assert their own identity and not have identity imposed on them (either from the past or in the future), and the restitution of traditional lands.

There are various bodies representing these people and speaking for them – notably in world forums. These bodies rely on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1996 and the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 of 1989 to assert their right to be respected as a people by the state.

In 1995 and 1996 South African Khoisan people attended United Nations conferences to make their presence known to the world. They succeeded in speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for by the South African Government and were recognised as the first indigenous peoples of Africa.

In 1997 UWC hosted an international conference on Khoisan identity and cultural heritage. This resulted in the formation of the Cape Cultural Heritage Development Organisation as a voice for the Khoisan.

Even though the ANC was preoccupied with transition post-1994 Bredekamp says Nelson Mandela showed "profound interest" in Khoisan religious issues.

At a time when the new South African Government was negotiating with traditional leaders of all types Khoisan people found they were able to use this agenda to put their own concerns on the table. However, Bredekamp says, the political process is in a "lethargic state". This relates to the very real difficulty the government faces in incorporating tribal ways into modern politics and the resulting impasse affects the Khoisan.

But culturally there is much ferment: the South African Heritage Resources Agency and the departments of arts and culture and tourism are looking into stimulating projects all over the country which will highlight Khoisan culture and

provide jobs in the tourism industry to Khoisan people.

And earlier this year when the National Khoisan Consultative Conference met, Deputy President Jacob Zuma opened the proceedings by calling it a 'defining moment for this nation'.

The NKCC has a council of 20 people who represent 10 regions in the country. The NKCC is an umbrella body representing many of the groups who have previously carried the flag for the scattered nations of the Khoisan.

Andrew Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur, great-grandson of the Robben Island prisoner whose full name he carries and chairperson of the Griqua National Conference of South Africa, is working towards the day when government accommodates indigenous people's rights.

"We have first nation status and we need a council to represent us in government. There are many people involved in this process. Our languages died out. We speak only Afrikaans and English. It's very sad. We need to take action to reclaim our heritage."

Chairperson of the National Khoisan Consultative Council, Cecil le Fleur, says: "We need to raise awareness of our heritage. We need to re-introduce the pride of who we are. We want to penetrate the coloured community. There's so much gangsterism because people want to belong. They want to fit in and be part of something. They call themselves 'coloured' but they don't know where they originate. The Western lifestyle was pushed on them throughout the colonial period. They can't see how important it is to see their roots. We need to unite our people. We need to show them where they belong."

In pursuit of what is rightfully theirs, the council is working towards establishing a legislative body to oversee the fulfilment of these and other rights.

"We want back our ancestral land and we want to protect our intellectual property. It's a big concern to the council that so many times people have come in, taken photos or made videos of our people and then gone off to make a lot of money without any real benefit for the Khoisan."

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'hotnot'

'boesman'

Critical issues



Prof Jatti Bredekamp outlines the critical issues affecting the Khoisan as:

- Due recognition of Khoisan symbols by the Christian churches of this country (many Khoisan are converted);
- Inclusion of Khoisan languages and history in education in schools;
- Consultation on the diorama – a depiction on the Khoisan as the colonialists encountered them – in the South African

Museum in Cape Town before it is dismantled because the current director thinks it is "demeaning". Many Khoisan argue it is one of the only places in SA which depicts their history;

- Repatriation of Khoisan remains – many bodies were taken over the years for scientific use by researchers impervious to Khoisan concerns about treating their ancestors with respect;
- Land rights;
- Protection of indigenous knowledge; and
- Fair representation in the media – on the issue of representation Bredekamp says "We are often still seen as 'boesman' and 'hotnot'. But he says, after this year's conference, coverage by the English press has showed less insensitivity to the aspirations of the Khoisan but Afrikaans journalism continues to be disinterested and not keen to disaggregate the Khoisan from the old notion of the 'coloured' race created under apartheid.

Khoisan broadcasting

Although the SA national broadcaster struggles to fulfil its mandate to broadcast in all 11 of the country's national languages, the Khoisan people – mostly concentrated in the Northern Cape – do have their own radio station.

XK-FM has 5 000 listeners and was launched in August last year. It has two producers who broadcast in the !Xhu language while two others broadcast in Khwe.

Producer Owen Kock says the station is situated in Schmidtsdrift (an area notorious for the dumping of soldier-trackers who were used by the apartheid defence force for cross border raids).

Programmes cover news, current affairs, music, story telling, education and dramas. "It is particularly our music and drama programmes that are the main crowd-pullers," says Owen.