



Rethinking Khoe and San indigeneity, language and culture in Southern Africa

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BOOK REVIEWS

Rethinking Khoe and San indigeneity, language and culture in Southern Africa, edited by Julie Grant and Keyan Tomaselli, London/New York, Routledge, 2022, 314 pp., £96 (Hardback), £35.99 (eBook), ISBN: 9781032329208

Save for the introduction, the 18 chapters in *Rethinking Khoe and San Indigeneity, Language and Culture in Southern Africa* appeared between 1995 and 2021 in the journal *Critical Arts: South-North Media Studies*, arguably the leading publication on Khoisan¹ issues for decades. Most contributors attended the 2018 conference *Rethinking Khoe and San Indigeneity, Language and Culture in the Transformation of School and Tertiary Education in South Africa* and published their papers in a double special issue the following year. Like its predecessor (Tomaselli & Wessels, 2015), the latest collection is an indispensable source for anyone wanting to keep up with the latest developments in the field. Readers will especially value the emphasis on methodology, as well as the wealth of information on Khoisan languages, both in the historical, linguistic and socio-linguistic sense.

The title which Julie Grant, Keyan Tomaselli and the late Michael Wessels picked for their introduction signals the overarching concern with language. ‘Literacy, Language and Orality Amongst the KhoeSan’, recounts how debates during the aforementioned 2018 conference revolved around the classification of indigenous languages, the extent to which they are still spoken today, and what can be done to revitalize these languages and address overall Khoisan marginalization. Conversations also frequently broached topics such as indigeneity, education, decolonization, methodology and research ethics. The diverse content of the volume reflects how this makes discussing language ‘complex and multi-dimensional’ (p. 3). The introduction notes how speakers of Khoisan languages mostly reside in Namibia and Botswana, rather than South Africa; that many languages are endangered or no longer spoken; and that most people with Khoisan ancestry grew up without being exposed to indigenous languages. Additional historical and political background information would have been helpful, particularly for readers who are unfamiliar with the Khoisan, but for whom the volume might appeal to, such as indigenous people elsewhere.

Interestingly enough, the first section, ‘KhoeSan Languages: Past to Present’ opens with a revisionist history of Afrikaans by the late Christo van Rensburg. By examining 17th century communications between the Khoisan and Europeans at the Cape, van Rensburg posits that Afrikaans owes its existence as much to Khoisan languages as European ones, if not more so: ‘When the Khoikhoi tried to learn Dutch words, this was the start of Afrikaans’ (p. 15). Hans du Plessis and Julie Grant’s chapter similarly argues that Afrikaans developed as a lingua franca on the colonial frontier with the input of the Khoisan in particular. Afrikaans, they argue, is ‘therefore less Germanic in origin and more Khoekhoe’ (p. 23). Menán Du Plessis instead surveys current debates about “languages more traditionally recognized as ‘indigenous’” (p. 5) in Southern Africa, with a focus on classification systems. Notably, Du Plessis details the amount of speakers, whether dictionaries and grammars are available, and whether the language is being taught at schools. Her chapter compliments Kerry Jones nicely, which provides additional facts, as well as practical recommendations to revitalize indigenous languages and enforce their protection under the constitution, such as comprehensively auditing the status-quo, prioritizing mother tongue education and digitizing existing resources. Crucially, like other contributors, Jones takes care to explain that language

revitalization is not a romantic pursuit of academics and philanthropists, but desired by the Khoisan themselves and always closely entangled with socioeconomic empowerment.

The first two chapters of 'Same but Different: The Struggle towards integrated societies', extend the discussion on language in relation to South African multiculturalism. Highlighting the underestimated interconnectedness between language, culture, and identity, Jeffrey Sehume passionately appeals for policies and multimedia uses to combat language loss, 'epistemicide', socio-economic marginalization, and stereotypes. This Khoisan 'renaissance', he argues, would benefit all South Africans and need not be essentialist. Shanade Barnabas and Samukelisiwe Miya reach a similar conclusion in their study of the KhoeSan revival movement in post-apartheid South Africa. Focusing on how prominent activists engage with Afrikaans, KhoeSan languages, and subcultures, such as Rastafarianism, they argue that, in the main, an essentialist identity is not at stake in language activism, but a hybrid, dynamic and anti-hegemonic one. This rather optimistic reading contrasts with Luan Staphorst's contribution, which suggests that indigeneity is ultimately essentialist and exclusionary, and therefore best exchanged for an apolitical framework. He pleads for 'heritage citizenship', which is centered on 'shared knowledge and heritage' (p. 109), rather than ownership and rights. Staphorst raises legitimate concerns and expresses a popular view in the literature, which surfaces elsewhere in the volume (see e.g. p. 53). However, he puts up somewhat of a strawman by reducing the notion of indigeneity and heritage to ownership and essentialism, thereby disregarding the realities of ongoing settler colonialism (Veracini & Verbuyst, 2020; Verbuyst, 2022).

In fact, indigeneity is conceptually underdeveloped in all contributions, including the introduction. This is somewhat surprising considering centrality of the concept in the volume's title, as well as the fact that most authors contributed in one way or another to *Rethinking Indigeneity*, a decades long research project headed by Keyan Tomaselli. Then again, *Rethinking Indigeneity* is primarily concerned with tourism, cultural identity and research methodology (see e.g. Tomaselli, 2012). The four chapters making up 'Decolonising/Indigenising Language: Experiences with KhoeSan Peoples' reflect this emphasis by boasting rich ethnographic data, innovative methods, and pioneering reflections on research ethics. Lauren Dyll pleads for researchers (and their institutions) to become culturally 'literate' by adopting creative methodologies, such as photo elicitation and comic book drawing, which facilitate co-production of knowledge, researcher reflexivity, and transformative decolonization. Mary Lange makes similar arguments by reflecting on the importance of research ethics and 'spiritual well-being' when disseminating and recording 'indigenous stories' (p. 150). Lange justly describes the San Code of Ethics as groundbreaking, but I would have appreciated a more critical reading in keeping with the tradition of *Rethinking Indigeneity*. Julie Grant's chapter gives a fascinating in-depth account of the photovoice workshops she organized with !Xun and Khwe Bushmen to facilitate the self-documentation of their grievances and amplify, rather than ventriloquize, their 'voice'. I particularly appreciate that she addresses the challenges which she encountered along the way. In the next chapter, Grant teams up with Amanda Sighrühn to survey language politics in South Africa and contemplate avenues for greater mother-tongue education at home or in the context of revitalization projects. Their interesting suggestions derive from their longstanding involvement with Khoisan communities, but given the contents, this chapter fits better in the previous section.

'Repurposing San Communicatory Practices to be Meaningful in the Contemporary World' contains two fascinating case studies. Itunu Bodunrin details his extensive fieldwork among !Xun and Khwe youth in Platfontein. The hip-hop music they create, he argues, should be regarded as a decolonial self-representational practice, which debunks stereotypes and affirms indigeneity. Moreover, longstanding San storytelling traditions are reinvented and indigenous

languages are preserved in the process. The chapter by Keyan Tomaselli and Julie Grant reconceptualizes tracking as a type of literacy as it allows the hunter to read the evidence in the landscape. Moreover, given increasing restrictions on hunting and access to hunting grounds, contemporary tracking serves multiple purposes, such as archiving cultural knowledge and generating nostalgia, creating tourism opportunities, and interfacing with modern computer technologies.

As the editors concede, the contributions making up the concluding section, 'Orality: From Literature to Politics' are rather eclectic. While not taking anything away from the quality of these texts, their inclusion adds little value to the volume as a whole. The chapters by Michael Wessels and Anne Solomon deal with/Xam stories in the Bleek and Lloyd collection and their academic reception. This collection plays a crucial, perhaps even foundational, role in Khoisan studies, but mainly as a historical source. Hence their chapters depart from the volume's explicit focus on the present. This also goes for Duncan Brown's chapter, which also touches on the Bleek and Lloyd collection, although his argument that/Xam storytelling signals the beginning of South African literary history chimes better with the volume's focus on literacy and its overall subversive orientation. Lastly, Megan Bieseles chapter touches on various aspects raised in earlier chapters, such as indigeneity, language and archives. Nevertheless, her text too is somewhat disconnected from the other contributions. Bieseles discusses changing forms of political representation and discourse on development among the Ju/'hoan San in Nyae Nyae, Namibia. She does this by scrutinizing a 'a wonderful archival resource' (p. 298), which remains underexplored: a series of letters and recordings of meetings dating between 1987 and 1993, when the Ju/'hoan San experienced an unprecedented degree of contact with the outside world.

The argument is often made that Khoisan studies is inescapably essentialist and therefore in perpetual decline. *Rethinking Khoe and San Indigeneity, Language and Culture in Southern Africa* proves these critics wrong. The contributors do not portray the Khoisan as static relics of the past, but as dynamic agents in the present. They explore 'what it means to be indigenous San and Khoe in contemporary southern Africa' (p. 2) by developing innovative methodologies, reflecting on positionality, and taking on board concerns that dominate the current intellectual climate; not least decolonization. I am convinced that these kinds of perspectives and methodologies allows Khoisan studies to re-invent its aims and *raison d'être* in the 21st century. Moreover, this way of doing research will hopefully also reach policymakers, who stand to learn a great deal from the volume's analyses of language-related issues, as well as the various policy recommendations.

To be sure, the volume is not without its flaws. The title covers an extensive geographical area and a swathe of themes, but most chapters center on (northern) South Africa, the San and the topic of language. I wanted to read more about pertinent themes such as land reform, indigenous knowledge, traditional leadership, and particularly representation, which dominated the 2015 edition (Tomaselli & Wessels, 2015), as well as various publications in *Critical Arts: South-North Media Studies*. It is also not clear whether contributors were given an opportunity to update their chapters and make them speak more directly to one another. Lastly, the editors and contributors are aware more than anyone of the manifold institutional constraints and overall complexities of including the Khoisan as co-producers of knowledge (see e.g. Tomaselli, 2014). Nevertheless, the Khoisan's absence in the volume is regrettable precisely because their dissatisfaction with academia's *modus operandi* has been flagged for so long, and because their inclusion is often regarded as essential to the field's survival and vitality (Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). The Khoisan are once more not participating (directly) in the academic debates about them. I would strongly recommend including at least a foreword or afterword written by a person of Khoisan descent in the next edition.

Therefore, combined with the hefty price tag, which the editors admittedly have little say in, I am uncertain to what degree the volume will 'bring issues of indigeneity, language, histories and culture into the public domain, in educational and other spaces' (p. 4). What is undeniable, however, is that *Rethinking Khoe and San Indigeneity, Language and Culture in Southern Africa* is setting the course in the right direction, hopefully influencing research for years to come.

Note

1. Reflecting ongoing debates in the literature, the volume and, correspondingly, this review uses different terms to refer to the indigenous people of Southern Africa.

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Notes on contributor

Rafael Verbuyst is an anthropologist and historian. His research interests include Khoisan revivalism, indigeneity, settler colonialism, land reform, and ethnographic methodology.

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Finding Afro-Mexico: race and nation after the revolution, by Theodore W. Cohen, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 335 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover), \$29.99 (paperback), \$29.99 (eBook), ISBN 9781108493017

Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution is a detailed charting of how Blackness became part of the Mexican national narrative in the twentieth century. With seven chapters tracing different anthropological, historical, and artistic embodiments of