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# Indigenous Resurgence in the Cape: The Intellectual Roots and Political Aspirations of Khoisan Revivalism

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## ABSTRACT

The Khoisan were decimated, dispossessed, and assimilated into the mixed-race group ‘coloured’ during colonialism and apartheid, spawning the myth of their extinction. However, Cape Town, where colonial history is most deeply entrenched, became the focal point of ‘Khoisan revivalism’ after the dismantling of apartheid. The origins and aims of the movement remain poorly understood, largely because of a lack of scholarly engagement with Khoisan revivalists. This article draws on governmental documents, media items, and interviews with key Khoisan revivalists and traces shifts in activist discourse, different ways of engaging the state, and significant academic, legal, and political developments. It presents a three-phased historical overview of the intellectual roots and political aspirations of Khoisan revivalism: from the 1970s, the criticism of coloured identity and writing of Khoisan revisionist historiography; in the 1990s, the identification by a group of coloured intellectuals as indigenous people and their demand for recognition by the state; and since 2012, the initiation of direct-action campaigns by a new cohort of activist, coinciding with legislative developments regarding land and traditional leadership. A new phase is arguably emerging since 2019 as Khoisan revivalists challenge and circumvent the state through party politics, land occupations, and private sector partnerships.

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In accordance with tradition, a praise singer celebrated the South African president at the 2019 State of the Nation Address. Unprecedentedly, a person with a Khoisan background was entrusted with the task.<sup>1</sup> Speaking in Khoekhoegowab, he called upon the ‘Creator *Tsui //Goatse*’ to bless Cyril Ramaphosa.

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1. The term ‘Khoisan’ has a controversial provenance in twentieth-century colonial ethnography which sought to differentiate, among others, between ‘Khoikhoi’ and ‘San’ on linguistic and cultural grounds and offered multiple variations in spelling doing so, such as ‘Khoi-San’ or ‘Khoesan’. Despite this, ‘Khoisan’ is the prevailing form of collective identification among ‘Khoisan revivalists’. My use of ‘Khoisan’ is neither a rejection or an endorsement of the term, nor does it disregard other forms of identification. For more on terminology, see J. Bam, *Ausi Told Me: Why Cape Herstoryographies Matter* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2021), xxi–xxviii.

He lifted eland horns above the president's head, appealing to the audience to 'unite for our heritage' and commemorate 'our ancestors'.<sup>2</sup> Though for drastically different reasons, the praise singer, self-styled 'King Goab Khoebaha Calvin Cornelius III', also made the news at parliament in Cape Town in July 2018 when he and his entourage hoisted the flag of the 'Sovereign State of Good Hope' at the front gates and told the incumbents to vacate the premises.<sup>3</sup> The borders of the freshly proclaimed, though unrecognised, state encompasses the Western Cape, Northern Cape, and Eastern Cape provinces, up to the Fish River. The website of the 'Royal House of the Khoisan Nation' justifies the secession on the grounds of the South African government's refusal to recognise Khoisan self-determination, indigenous rights, and land claims.<sup>4</sup> Similar arguments circulated a month before the proclamation of the Khoisan state during a public consultation about renaming Cape Town International Airport. Activists proposed it be named after Krotoa, the seventeenth-century Khoisan mediator with the Dutch. They argued that the ancient presence of the Khoisan needed to be foregrounded and that numerous sites had already been named after African National Congress (ANC) politicians.<sup>5</sup> The public consultation was suspended after a member of the Gatvol Capetonians (fed-up Cape Town citizens), a social movement set up in 2017 with a focus on housing, threatened with 'war' should the Khoisan be ignored.

'Khoisan revivalism' is defined by calls for indigenous rights, historical justice, and cultural development, though these may be articulated in diverse ways and for varying reasons.<sup>6</sup> Since the dismantling of apartheid and in the context of indigenous resurgence movements elsewhere, there has been an exponential increase in the number of people who identify and engage in activism as 'Khoisan', or of alternative terms denoting the ethnic groups who first inhabited present-day South Africa.<sup>7</sup> When Khoisan revivalists and others

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2. '#SONA2019: This Is What the Khoisan Imbongi Said', *Independent Online*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/sona2019-this-is-what-the-khoisan-imbongi-said-27030378>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  3. M. Besent, 'Khomani San Distance Themselves from Khoisan Sovereign State Call', *SABC News*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/khomani-san-distance-selves-khoisan-seceded-call/>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  4. 'Sovereign State of Good Hope', <https://sovereignstateofgoodhope.com/>, accessed 21 November 2024. See also the section 'Constitution' (<https://sovereignstateofgoodhope.com/read>).
  5. 'Meeting over Cape Town Airport Renaming Descends into Chaos', *Huffington Post UK*, 5 June 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2018/06/05/meeting-over-cape-town-airport-renaming-descends-into-chaos\\_a\\_23450944/](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2018/06/05/meeting-over-cape-town-airport-renaming-descends-into-chaos_a_23450944/), accessed 3 October 2022. The campaign, now headed by the 'Krotoa Foundation', is ongoing. See S. Vuso, 'Khoisan Community to Push Forward with Airport Name Change Campaign', *Independent Online*, 11 August 2022, <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/khoisan-community-to-push-forward-with-airport-name-change-campaign-5f67d0de-20be-4cb8-a7bc-02f4dbcb0534>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  6. H. Bredekamp, 'Khoisan Revivalism and the Indigenous Peoples Issue in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in A. Barnard with J. Kenrick, eds, *Africa's Indigenous Peoples: 'First Peoples' or 'Marginalised Minorities'?* (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2001), 191–210.
  7. M. Besten, 'Transformation and Reconstitution of Khoe-San Identities: AAS le Fleur I, Griqua Identities and Post-Apartheid Khoe-San Revivalism (1894–2004)' (PhD thesis, Leiden University, Leiden, 2006); C. Sato, 'Khoisan Revivalism and Land Question in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in F. Brandt with G. Mkodzongi, eds, *Land Reform Revisited: Democracy, State Making and Agrarian*

speak of ‘revival’, they do not imply the total disappearance of Khoisan identification in the wake of their well-documented decimation, dispossession, and assimilation as ‘coloureds’, a nineteenth-century mixed-race label that emphasises European descent but includes African and Asian heritage as well.<sup>8</sup> In apartheid’s racial hierarchy, coloureds fared worse than ‘whites’ but, generally speaking, better than ‘blacks’ (that is, Bantu-speaking populations). Awareness of Khoisan ancestry neither disappeared completely nor amongst all coloureds, but, as Khoisan revivalists readily acknowledge, the suppression of Khoisan identity during colonialism and apartheid was widely internalised, as was the colonialist trope that the Khoisan were virtually extinct.<sup>9</sup> Khoisan identification was not tolerated before 1994, particularly in Cape Town, where colonial history is most deeply entrenched and the majority of residents still know themselves as coloureds. And yet, after apartheid was abolished, Cape Town became the focal point of Khoisan revivalism. Indeed, it is here in particular that a growing minority is rejecting coloured identity and campaigning for land, traditional leadership titles, and recognition as indigenous people, amongst much else.

This raises the question: where does Khoisan revivalism come from and what motivates its adherents? Media coverage largely suggests that it is about making outlandish entitlement claims – the disproportionate coverage of the above-mentioned secession by ‘King Cornelius’ is a case in point. Khoisan grievances are viewed with scepticism and the emphasis on indigeneity is perceived as divisive and racially loaded.<sup>10</sup> One pundit has, for example, suggested that Khoisan revivalists recycle apartheid-era ‘brown nationalism’ by claiming original ownership of the land and greater victimhood than blacks.<sup>11</sup> Influenced by the anti-apartheid critique of race and ethnicity, academics often echo these concerns.<sup>12</sup> The brand of identity politics espoused by Khoisan revivalists certainly merits scrutiny, but the existing scholarship only skims the surface. The movement’s origins remain unaccounted for and the critics’ broad-brush approach habitually conflates self-identification with colonial representations of the Khoisan and coloureds,

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*Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 200–206; S. Øvernes, *Street Khoisan: On Belonging, Recognition and Survival* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2019).

8. For more on the use of terminology in these contexts, see A. Taiaiake and J. Cornthassel, ‘Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism’, *Government and Opposition*, 40, 4 (2005), 597–614; M. Forte, ed., *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).
9. Bam, *Ausi Told Me*.
10. S. Jacobs and Z. Levenson, ‘The Limits of Coloured Nationalism’, *Mail and Guardian*, 13 June 2018, <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-06-13-00-the-limits-of-coloured-nationalism/>, accessed 3 October 2022.
11. K. Kombuis, ‘Afrikaaps: The New Rebellion on the Block’, *News24*, 4 February 2013, <https://www.news24.com/channel/Columnists/Koos-Kombuis/Afrikaaps-The-new-rebellion-on-the-block-20130131>, accessed 3 October 2022.
12. See, for example, J. Sharp and E. Boonzaier, ‘Ethnic Identity as Performance: Lessons from Namaqualand’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 3 (1994), 405–416; Besten, ‘Transformation and Reconstitution’; C. Rassool, ‘The Politics of Nonracialism in South Africa’, *Public Culture*, 31, 2 (2019), 343–371. For a broader overview of post-apartheid research on Khoisan identity, representation, and politics, see R. Verbuyst, ‘Khoisan Identity, Politics, and Representation in Post-Apartheid South Africa (1994–2022): A Selective and Annotated Bibliography’, *Electronic Journal of Africana Bibliography*, 17, 1 (2022), 1–35.

disregarding agency and foreclosing the possibility that Khoisan revivalism is also about Khoisan-related issues. First-hand engagements with Khoisan revivalists in Cape Town rarely feature in the field of Khoisan Studies, which maintains its traditional focus on the Griqua and San subgroups, who experienced colonialism differently and managed to maintain closer ties to their heritage.<sup>13</sup> Only a handful of scholars have scrutinised Cape Town's Khoisan revivalist scene, looking at land claims, language, epistemology, and everyday discourses on identity.<sup>14</sup> Their work is insightful but leaves largely unanswered questions about the movement's intellectual roots, political aspirations, and reception by the South African state: when did Khoisan revivalism emerge? Who has been at its helm? What are the aims of Khoisan revivalists and how have they engaged with and collaborated against the state to pursue them?

I delve into these questions by scrutinising the historical trajectory of Khoisan revivalism and unpacking its contemporary challenge to South African politics, with a focus on pivotal events, shifts in activist discourse, and perspectives expressed by Khoisan themselves. I consider various national developments, though always from the perspective of Cape Town-based Khoisan revivalism. Many aspects that I raise warrant a more critical or detailed discussion, such as the use of terms like 'chief' or 'King', or the intricate relationship between Khoisan revivalism and coloured identity. However, that would require not only much more space but a different approach altogether. While I do not take the Khoisan points of view as facts, my priority lies with understanding how Khoisan revivalists have regarded their cause across the movement's existence. Having said that, too many individuals have contributed to the movement to be included here. They can be difficult to track down and their organisations are often short-lived, underfunded, and loosely held together, making it a challenging environment to conduct research in.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, my research primarily draws on interviews with individuals who, in my estimation, have had an enduring impact on Khoisan revivalism and epitomise its central tenets. I also rely on documentation that they produce, as well as media items and government sources, collected mainly during approximately two and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork in Cape Town, conducted between 2014 and 2022.

With these caveats in mind, I argue that the development of Khoisan revivalism over time can be classified into three phases. These phases cannot be

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13. See, for example, E. Schweitzer, *The Making of Griqua, Inc.: Indigenous Struggles for Land and Autonomy in South Africa* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2015).

14. J. Bam-Hutchison, 'Contemporary Khoisan Identities in the Western Cape and Campaigns for Social Justice', *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 69, 2 (2015), 215–232; R. Verbuyst, 'Claiming Cape Town: Towards a Symbolic Interpretation of Khoisan Activism and Land Claims', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 39, 2 (2016), 83–96; J. Brown and A. Deumert, "'My Tribe is the Hessequa. I'm Khoisan. I'm African": Language, Desire and Performance among Cape Town's Khoisan Language Activists', *Multilingua*, 36 (2017), 571–594; Øvernes, *Street Khoisan*; Bam, *Ausi Told Me*. For more on shifting trends in Khoisan Studies, see R. Verbuyst, 'The Decolonial Turn in Khoisan Studies: Opportunities, Pitfalls, and New Directions in Longstanding Debates Concerning Southern Africa's Indigenous People', *Critical Arts*, 37, 5 (2024), 40–56.

15. See also Sato, 'Khoisan Revivalism and Land Question'.

neatly delineated, nor do they correspond to specific people, although certain individuals tend to usher in new trends. Rather, they are defined by a combination of academic, legal, and political developments, as well as emphases in activist discourse and distinct strategies of engaging the South African state. As such, I show in the first section how Khoisan revivalism's ideology can be traced back to the criticism of coloured identity by anti-apartheid activists and to the late Henry Bredekamp, South Africa's first coloured academic historian, who publicised Khoisan revisionist historiography from the 1970s onward. Marking a second phase and the advent of Khoisan identity politics, coloured intellectuals began identifying as indigenous people and demanding recognition from the state in the 1990s. In the third section, I show how a new cohort of activists embarked on more confrontational and direct-action campaigns since 2012 against the backdrop of ongoing legislative developments regarding land and traditional leadership. I end this section with the signing of the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act in 2019. In the concluding section I reflect on whether another phase has arguably been unfolding in recent years, with Khoisan revivalists explicitly challenging and circumventing the state in unprecedented ways through party politics, land occupations, and private sector partnerships.

### 1975–1997: Rethinking Khoisan history and coloured identity

Why locate the origins of Khoisan revivalism in the year 1975? It could be argued that the 1970s saw no clearer evidence of indigenous resurgence than the preceding or following decade. Nevertheless, the two principal intellectual and political traditions that inform the movement began to converge during this period, namely the rethinking of coloured identity and the revision of Khoisan history. These currents crossed paths in the figure of Henry Bredekamp, who was appointed as a lecturer-researcher at the coloureds-only University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1975, becoming the first academic historian of colour in South Africa. To fully comprehend his role as an avant-gardist, it is essential to consider the fact that anti-apartheid activists had been critiquing coloured identity for decades. Indeed, although the term 'Khoisan' was not in use until after 1994, many veteran Khoisan revivalists were opposed to apartheid and drew inspiration from the long tradition of criticising coloured identity.<sup>16</sup> Amongst the first to do so were Marxist intellectuals who advocated for non-racialism in the early twentieth century and organisations such as the Non-European Unity Movement who carried this criticism over to the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> However, in part because these critics did not

16. R. Lee, 'Twenty-First Century Indigenism', *Anthropological Theory*, 6, 4 (2006), 466.

17. M. Adhikari, 'Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910–1994' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2002), 25–26.

emphasise the importance of precolonial history, most coloureds held on to their assigned assimilationist label in an effort to safeguard their relative privileges under apartheid. With the United Democratic Front, a broad coalition of anti-apartheid organisations that rose to prominence in the 1980s when the ANC leadership was exiled and imprisoned, a critical mass of coloureds did begin to reject apartheid's racial and ethnic premises. Drawing inspiration from Black Consciousness and Black Liberation Theology, leading individuals within these circles diagnosed coloureds with a 'false consciousness'.<sup>18</sup> The argument was made that Coloureds were just as 'black' as they too were oppressed and had an African heritage to be proud of. They could join the anti-apartheid struggle, but as blacks, not as coloureds.

Bredekamp was partial to such arguments, though, significantly, he believed that Khoisan ancestry needed to be foregrounded. As Bredekamp explained to me during one of our interviews, his choice to contravene his mandate to prop up apartheid conceptions of coloured history was partially informed by his upbringing in Genadendal, an eighteenth-century mission station aimed at converting the local Khoisan.<sup>19</sup> More fundamental to his decision, however, were foreign works of 1970s Khoisan revisionist historiography that emphasised resistance and colonial exploitation, to which he was exposed to during his time at UWC. He was particularly inspired by the work of Canadian historian Richard Elphick, who later arranged a bursary for him to study in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Upon returning to South Africa in 1983, Bredekamp was convinced that the most effective way of influencing coloureds' 'sense of ancestral heritage' was through the dissemination of popularised contributions in Afrikaans, the mother tongue of most coloureds, in addition to the organisation of conferences. As such, towards the end of apartheid, Bredekamp's Khoisan revivalism went from an intellectual pursuit to a more pronounced public history initiative. Upon realising that he had been the sole African delegate at a Khoisan Studies' conference in Tutzing, Germany, in 1994, he persuaded leading scholars in the field to organise the next conference in Cape Town. The intellectual climate in post-apartheid South Africa was conducive to such a gathering, as evidenced by the controversy surrounding Pippa Skotnes' exhibition *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen*, which opened in Cape Town in April 1996.<sup>21</sup> Inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which sought to uncover the evils of apartheid in the spirit of historical justice and forgiveness, *Miscast* critiqued colonialist

18. C. Thomas, 'Disaffection, Identity, Black Consciousness and a New Rector: An Exploratory Take on Student Activism at the University of the Western Cape 1966–1976', *South African Historical Journal*, 54, 1, 72–90.

19. Interview with H. Bredekamp, Cape Town, South Africa, 30 April 2018.

20. R. Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

21. P. Skotnes, ed., *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996).



representations of the Khoisan. However, some Khoisan activists felt that Skotnes extended this tradition by taking it upon herself to exhibit the horrors of colonialism without restraint as a white academic. As a pamphlet circulating at a public forum about *Miscast* put it: 'Where are our representations of the people who came here to steal our land, make us slaves and deprive us of our culture and our history?'<sup>22</sup>

Heading the controversies surrounding *Miscast* and strongly committed to empowering the Khoisan people's agency, Bredekamp insisted not only that Khoisan from all over Southern Africa be invited to the next Khoisan Studies conference but that their representatives join the organising committee. One such individual was Joseph Little, a lecturer in engineering at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. In the course of our interview, Little recounted how his family was classified coloured and how his relatives only acknowledged their European ancestry.<sup>23</sup> He became aware of his Khoisan roots by chance while researching his family tree in the early 1980s and establishing that his grandmother on his father's side was Khoisan. When I met Little, he showed me various worn-out books that had aided his quest to learn as much as possible about the Khoisan ever since, amongst them the work by Elphick that had already inspired Bredekamp. Emphasising Khoisan ancestry was an attractive alternative to fronting European roots or adopting a generic black identity. It was a response to the widely shared perception that coloureds were not 'white' enough during apartheid and not 'black' enough to be counted as equals after 1994.<sup>24</sup> An enduringly sensitive matter in this regard is the implementation of affirmative action policies aimed at mending racially skewed education and employment patterns inherited from apartheid. Speaking to a *Mail and Guardian* reporter in 1997, Little felt these policies disproportionately benefitted blacks, which is why he established the non-profit Cape Cultural Heritage Development Council (CCHDC) in August 1996.<sup>25</sup> The organisation's aim, influenced by debates on heritage and identity waged during the anti-apartheid struggle, was 'to foster unity among historically Coloured people and give them pride in their origin [...] Black people have no respect for us because we have no ancestral roots'. By emphasising socio-economic empowerment and ancestral pride in the face of marginalisation by the 'black-majority' post-apartheid government, Little laid the foundations of Khoisan identity politics. A seat on the organising committee of the 1997 Khoisan Studies conference afforded him the ideal opportunity to broadcast his message and effectively kickstart Khoisan revivalism.

22. As quoted in E. Bregin, 'Miscast: Bushmen in the Twentieth Century', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 13, 1 (2001), 87–88.

23. Interview with J. Little, Cape Town, South Africa, 17 May 2018.

24. M. Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

25. 'Chief Little Takes on a Big Job', *Mail and Guardian*, 25 July 1997, <https://mg.co.za/article/1997-07-25-chief-little-takes-on-a-big-job/>, accessed 3 October 2022.



## 1997–2012: Indigeneity and the politicisation of Khoisan identity

For Bredekamp, the 1997 conference marked the commencement of ‘a battle for identity’; for Little this battle signified the resurgence of ‘a proud and honourable nation’.<sup>26</sup> The 62 Khoisan delegates outnumbered the academic attendees and made the ‘Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference’ into the first major public affirmation of Khoisan revivalism. Cultural performances emphasising the vibrancy of Khoisan heritage suffused the programme and Khoisan delegates actively participated in debates, lamenting their lack of involvement in the design and operationalisation of research. Their interventions frequently called for the official recognition of the Khoisan as ‘indigenous people’, an international legal concept denoting people meeting the following non-exclusive criteria: self-definition as indigenous; historical occupation of a territory prior to dominant others; maintenance of culturally distinct practices; and ongoing marginalisation.<sup>27</sup> Backed by non-Khoisan advisors, the more established Griqua and San collectives in particular attempted to shine an international spotlight on their grievances by referencing the First International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (1995–2004) and movements of indigenous resurgence elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

Amongst others, non-governmental organisations working with San communities were taken aback when Little also identified as indigenous, given that they perceived his urban upbringing to clash with that of their primary constituents, the Kalahari Desert-based communities who still practiced traditional ways of life, or who are commonly represented as doing so.<sup>29</sup> Aware that many considered him to be lacking overt markers of indigeneity, Little constructed an overarching Khoisan identity by mobilising imagery and accessories that are readily associated with the Khoisan and by establishing connections with the more established Khoisan representatives. For example, Little insisted that Khoekhoegowab native speakers join the conference ‘so that people could know *our* language was not dead and that *we* are not dead’ and refashioned a toga into a faux-leopard skin kaross for the occasion.<sup>30</sup> Little also joined other delegates in flagging historic wrongs that were not dealt with by the TRC or the land restitution programme, which only concerned itself with racially motivated disposessions after 1913, when the Natives Land Act allocated 87 per cent of South African territory to whites. In 1999, Little even joined the Khoisan delegation that had been attending the United Nations in

26. A. Bank, ed., *The Proceedings of the Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference: Organized by the Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, held at the South African Museum, Cape Town, 12–16 July 1997* (Cape Town: Institute for Historical Research, 1998), 7, 14.

27. R. Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 19.

28. Besten, ‘Transformation and Reconstitution’, 276.

29. *Ibid.*, 297.

30. Interview with J. Little, Cape Town, South Africa, 17 May 2018.

Geneva on an annual basis since 1995 – a testament to his success in reframing Khoisan revivalists as indigenous claimants.

Little also leveraged his new-found prominence to steer negotiations concerning the Khoisan's constitutional recognition. Following a meeting with Griqua representatives in 1995, then-President Nelson Mandela instructed his government to investigate the matter further.<sup>31</sup> Upon attending the 1997 conference, officials came to understand that matters regarding the Khoisan extended beyond the Griqua and the San. This led to the establishment of an overarching Khoisan forum with 22 members with a mandate to advise the government on how to constitutionally recognise the Khoisan and their traditional leadership, which was renamed the National Khoi-San Council in 1998.<sup>32</sup> Little ensured that Khoisan revivalists took the lead in these negotiations. It is noteworthy in this regard that Little was appointed chairperson in place of the Griqua leaders who had been campaigning for recognition for decades.<sup>33</sup> At the 1997 conference, Little had ceremoniously inducted several 'chiefs', himself included. These appointees were tasked with reviving tribes mentioned in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources. These historical groups had been meticulously documented by Elphick, who also used the term 'chief', which is likely the reason for why Little used it too.<sup>34</sup> While Little occasionally claimed descent from a 'royal tribe' in the media, he emphasised to me that nobody in his entourage purported to be a direct descendant from historical 'chiefs'.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the appointees' families originated from the traditional territories of their respective tribes and were dedicated to reviving Khoisan culture in these areas. Little and his fellow CCHDC members supported their claims with research and fieldtrips. Effectively the CCHDC became an expanding network of coloured intellectuals from the Western and Eastern Cape, some of whom with PhD degrees, such as Willa Boezak or George Brink. For a while it met weekly in a community library in a suburb of Cape Town to discuss works of Khoisan revisionist historiography, some of them donated by academics who were sympathetic to their cause. In reference to the Eurocentric bias in the literature, Little referenced in this regard how 'we had to swing the history more in our favour'.<sup>36</sup>

Academic fora continued to be targeted as well, most notably during Bredekamp's 2001 'consultative' conference in Oudtshoorn, where most presenters had a Khoisan background and over 500 people attended.<sup>37</sup> The 2001 conference was not just a conference on Khoisan Studies but also a public forum where delegates presented their grievances to the South African government

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31. Bredekamp, 'Khoisan Revivalism', 204.

32. Interview with H. Bredekamp, Cape Town, South Africa, 10 July 2018.

33. See Besten, 'Transformation and Reconstitution'.

34. *Ibid.*, 294–295.

35. 'Chief Little Takes on a Big Job'.

36. Interview with J. Little, Cape Town, South Africa, 17 May 2018.

37. Besten, 'Transformation and Reconstitution', 320.

and collectively deliberated policy suggestions. Amongst other topics, CCHDC delegates gave presentations on the ‘internationalisation of Coloured identity’ and the complicated relationship between Christianity and Khoisan spirituality.<sup>38</sup> In the words of one attendee, the 2001 conference was all about ‘self-affirmation and multidimensional empowerment’.<sup>39</sup> In his opening address, then-Deputy President Jacob Zuma set the tone in this regard by promising ‘increased benefits’ for ‘the first indigenous people of our country’.<sup>40</sup> He was clearly hinting at legislation that would grant the Khoisan indigenous status and the ceremonial and political powers the state had previously bestowed upon non-Khoisan traditional leaders.<sup>41</sup>

However, the government was pursuing several policy options. In 2000, Bredekamp was consulted on this matter together with Nic Olivier, a colleague from the University of Pretoria’s law faculty.<sup>42</sup> After reviewing various international contexts and guidelines, Bredekamp and Olivier advised the South African government against the recognition of the Khoisan as ‘indigenous people’. Instead, they proposed the categorisation of the Khoisan as ‘vulnerable indigenous people’ or ‘indigenous minority’. The rationale behind this approach is that the Khoisan are one of numerous indigenous people in South Africa, even if facing specific forms of marginalisation related to language, land, and culture. The government has acted on this advice in an ambiguous manner ever since. In 2005, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples was invited to South Africa, but the government never officially responded to his policy recommendations, such as scrapping the 1913 cut-off date in the land reform programme.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, South Africa signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, but it is a non-binding agreement and thus has had little impact on the ground. These examples illustrate a pattern whereby the Khoisan are occasionally acknowledged as indigenous people with legitimate grievances, though never in a legally exclusive or otherwise clearly defined sense. For a long time, the government was similarly ambiguous in its response to Khoisan traditional leadership claims. On this matter, the 2000 report by Bredekamp and Olivier flagged the absence of ‘credible written and oral

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- 38. B. Coetzee, ‘Khoisan Identiteit’, in Institute for Historical Research, ed., *National Khoisan Consultative Conference Oudtshoorn: 29 March to 1 April 2001* (Cape Town: University of the Western Cape, 2001), 17–26; W. Boezak, ‘Khoisan Geloof’, in Institute for Historical Research, ed., *National Khoisan Consultative Conference Oudtshoorn: 29 March to 1 April 2001* (Cape Town: University of the Western Cape, 2001), 1–11.
  - 39. Besten, ‘Transformation and Reconstitution’, 323.
  - 40. J. Zuma, *Address by Deputy President Zuma to the Opening Ceremony of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference* (Pretoria: Government of South Africa, 2001).
  - 41. I. van Kessel and B. Oomen, ‘“One Chief, One Vote”: The Revival of Traditional Authorities in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *African Affairs*, 96, 385 (1997), 561–585.
  - 42. H. Bredekamp and N. Olivier, *Khoisan Communities in South Africa: Background, International Context, Constitutional Framework and Proposals on Accommodation* (Pretoria: Department of Traditional Affairs, 2000).
  - 43. R. Stavenhagen, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People – Mission to South Africa* (Geneva: United Nations, 2005).

sources' and pleaded for 'a much more reliable study of the bloodline claims of all current "chiefs" and the extent of their support base.<sup>44</sup> They single out Little in their report as 'extremely problematic', not least because he allegedly charged membership fees – a claim he denies.<sup>45</sup> Partially because of the widespread notion that the Khoisan were virtually extinct, the government was uncertain as to whether existing legislation could or should accommodate their traditional leadership claims in the same way that leaders of other ethnic groups had been recognised.<sup>46</sup> Bredekamp and Olivier for their part recommended a 'special form of recognition and protection by the state', although they did not elaborate on the specifics on this proposal.<sup>47</sup> In 2004, the government decided to design separate legislation, only to change course in 2009 and contemplate new legislation that would cover traditional leaders from all ethnic groups in the country, which I cover in the next section.<sup>48</sup>

Notwithstanding the policy reversals and the uncertain outcome of these developments, the allure of government-funded traditional leadership positions spurred many Khoisan revivalists to establish their own tribal houses. As evidenced in his remarks in the 2000 report, Bredekamp was disheartened by how this resulted in significant discord and division amongst Khoisan revivalists. To him, this development smacked of opportunism, ignored historical facts, and distorted the movement's original emphasis on heritage and identity.<sup>49</sup> After co-organising the reburial of Sarah Baartman in 2002, a Khoisan woman who was paraded as an exotic specimen in nineteenth-century Europe and whose remains were kept in France until the 1970s, Bredekamp assumed a less prominent role in the movement. His proposal to establish a Khoisan Studies centre at UWC was shut down by colleagues who felt that a focus on ethnicity was out of step with post-apartheid times. While its members featured prominently at Baartman's reburial, the CCHDC also soon became dysfunctional.<sup>50</sup> According to former member Basil Coetzee, many members left to establish their own organisations, where they assumed the most prominent roles and portrayed themselves as the most 'authentic' and 'representative' spokespersons of Khoisan revivalism in anticipation of potential government salaries.<sup>51</sup> The National Khoi-San Council continued to

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44. Bredekamp and Olivier, *Khoisan Communities*, 46, 95–96, 170.

45. *Ibid.*, 15.

46. Thabo Mbeki famously pronounced the Khoisan 'perished' in his well-known 1996 speech 'I am an African'.

47. Bredekamp and Olivier, *Khoisan Communities*, 148.

48. The 2009 'Draft White Paper on Khoi-San Communities, Leadership and Structures' is said to be responsible for this policy U-turn, but it is not publicly available. See NCOP Cooperative Governance and Public Administration, 'National House of Traditional Leaders Strategic Plan 2011–2013 Briefing', *Parliamentary Monitoring Group*, 28 February 2011, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/12638/>, accessed 3 October 2022.

49. Interview with H. Bredekamp, Cape Town, South Africa, 10 July 2018.

50. B. Coetzee, *Tears of the Praying Mantis: The Christian Church and the Conversion of the Khoikhoi to 'Coloured' Christian Identity* (Cape Town: Mbana Publishing and Printing, 2019), 220.

51. Interview with B. Coetzee, Cape Town, South Africa, 25 April 2018.

negotiate with the government, yet, as a non-statutory entity with limited financial resources, it lacked the capacity to exert significant influence. Little felt ‘usurped by illegitimate chiefs’ and eventually stepped down as chair of the National Khoi-San Council in 2011, although the exact circumstances of his departure from the frontlines of Khoisan politics remain unclear. With Little and Bredekamp no longer occupying the most influential positions within the movement and Khoisan politics undergoing a period of stagnation, this phase in Khoisan revivalism was reaching its conclusion. However, Bredekamp, Little, and the CCHDC had laid the groundwork for an even more dynamic Khoisan revivalism in the 2010s. Indeed, as I show next, the vacuum left by Bredekamp and Little was filled by a new cohort of Khoisan revivalists who perceived and mobilised Khoisan identity in a markedly different manner against a backdrop of significant legal and political developments.

### **2012–2019: Direct-action activism, land, and traditional leadership**

Arguably no other event exemplified the shifting nature of Khoisan revivalism better than the //Hui !Gaeb Campaign of June 2012. A couple of dozen people gathered in front of the seventeenth-century colonial fort in central Cape Town, the ‘Castle of Good Hope’, to ceremoniously restore the city’s professed Khoisan name and broadcast their grievances to the world. During the campaign, ‘//Hui !Gaeb’ was displayed on a large billboard, which was later removed by the city.<sup>52</sup> The activists also displayed signs bearing the phrases ‘Alienation and Extermination of the Khoisan’ and ‘Khoisan Forever, “Coloured” Never!’. Tania Kleinhans-Cedras, one of the two founders of the Institute for the Restoration of the Aborigines of South Africa (IRASA) in 2009, informed reporters that her campaign was not contingent upon the approval of ‘colonialists’ as she was entitled to exercise her internationally recognised indigenous rights. Two months prior, IRASA co-founder Francisco ‘Mackie’ MacKenzie similarly marked ‘360 years of colonialism’ by covering the statue of Dutch colonialist Jan van Riebeeck in downtown Cape Town in black rubbish bags.<sup>53</sup> In 2013, IRASA members temporarily occupied a building in Cape Town’s District Six, a historically multicultural area that its former residents, forcibly removed during the apartheid era, are trying to reclaim in a complex restitution case. Mackie argued that it was his ‘fundamental right’ to occupy the land of his Khoisan ancestors.<sup>54</sup>

52. ‘Khoisan Group Renames the Cape’, *Eyewitness News*, 28 June 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1stIhiV5L0&ab\\_channel=EyewitnessNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1stIhiV5L0&ab_channel=EyewitnessNews), accessed 3 October 2022.

53. ‘Khoisan People Aim to Reclaim Their heritage’, *SABC News*, 6 April 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjDlydJe6jw&ab\\_channel=SABC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjDlydJe6jw&ab_channel=SABC), accessed 3 October 2022.

54. Interview with Mackie, Cape Town, South Africa, 2 July 2018.

In contrast to Little and his colleagues, who primarily engaged with the South African government, IRASA adopted an unprecedented direct-action approach. It is noteworthy that, in a sense, IRASA too has its roots at UWC, as Mackie and Kleinhans-Cedras both worked at its theology library in the 1980s.<sup>55</sup> Kleinhans-Cedras's family was forcibly removed on numerous occasions during apartheid, which instilled in her a staunch commitment to the cause of land rights and an aversion to being labelled coloured.<sup>56</sup> Mackie for his part came to resent coloured identity and its connotations of cultural and racial amalgamation after his 'awakening' in 1969, when someone called him '*amalawu*', an isiXhosa insult meaning 'soulless person'.<sup>57</sup> This incident became a formative experience and sent him on a journey to 'rediscover himself' in his native Namaqualand in the Northern Cape, which he had left for Cape Town at a young age. Mackie proceeded to 'conscientise' others about their Khoisan roots, including Kleinhans-Cedras and Bredekamp, who for his part maintains that his activism far predates Mackie's. Mackie also alleged that Little had stolen his plans for the original National Khoi-San Council. Whatever the case may be, Mackie evidently partnered up with Kleinhans-Cedras to take to the streets and put pressure on the government to acknowledge and deal with Khoisan grievances.

Zenzile Khoisan, a prominent local journalist and investigator for the TRC, played an equally pivotal role in shaping this new brand of activism.<sup>58</sup> Not unlike what happened to Mackie, one of Khoisan's 'comrades' in the exiled anti-apartheid movement told him in 1983 that, as a coloured, he had no culture or history.<sup>59</sup> In response, Khoisan asserted that his ancestors 'fought the colonialists long before Shaka Zulu was born'. In the aftermath of this incident, he unofficially altered his name to 'Zenzile Khoisan'. 'Zenzile' is an isiZulu word he translates as 'taking responsibility'. Khoisan later resided in New York for a period of time on a refugee passport, where he interacted with African-Americans and indigenous activists before returning to South Africa 'with a Khoisan consciousness' after 1994. He participated in the 2001 conference and was loosely affiliated to Little's group until he became fed up with the slow pace of Khoisan politics. He 'put the whole thing in overdrive' by establishing the community newspaper *Eerste Nasie Nuus* (First Nation News) in 2013 with fellow journalist Debbie Hendricks.<sup>60</sup> Described as the 'mid-wife' for the Khoisan revivalist movement, this medium is almost exclusively authored by Khoisan activists. When funding permits, up to 5000 issues are reportedly

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55. Interview with Mackie, Cape Town, South Africa, 4 July 2018.

56. Interview with T. Kleinhans-Cedras, Cape Town, South Africa, 3 January 2015.

57. Interview with Mackie, Cape Town, South Africa, 2 July 2018.

58. Khoisan wrote about his work at the TRC in his memoir. Z. Khoisan, *Jakaranda Time: An Investigator's View of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Cape Town: Garib Communications, 2001).

59. Interview with Z. Khoisan, Cape Town, South Africa, 2 May 2018.

60. In 2020, the newspaper changed its name to *First Nation News/Inheemse Spoor*.



distributed per month across South Africa, though predominantly in Cape Town.<sup>61</sup> The newspaper informs its readers about upcoming events and publishes foreign and domestic news concerning indigenous people. It also features dedicated sections on culture and history, including on how to carry out genealogical research.

Just like the members of IRASA, the contributors to *Eerste Nasie Nuus* are committed to raising awareness about the marginalisation of the Khoisan under the ANC-led government. Rather than seeking to appease the government, the contemporary discourse on indigeneity is borne out of frustration with the lack of change. As a result, it is unprecedentedly confrontational and demanding of historical justice. IRASA mainstreamed the term ‘cultural genocide’ amongst Khoisan revivalists, which is an international concept denoting the erasure of indigenous people’s identity and culture.<sup>62</sup> During our interview, Kleinhans-Cedras argued that referring to the Khoisan as coloureds denies their indigeneity, thereby prolonging cultural genocide, which only affected the Khoisan because ‘blacks at least kept their culture through apartheid’s homeland system’.<sup>63</sup> In her estimation, the Khoisan continue to endure the longest and most devastating colonial experience. Zenzile Khoisan too believed that most South Africans only truly validate the historical suffering of ‘blacks’.<sup>64</sup> In reference to the 1913 cut-off date in the land restitution programme, he argued that debates on historical justice in South Africa erroneously ‘start history in the middle’. He described it as follows in an *Eerste Nasie Nuus* article:

The history of our people has been lost, stolen, strayed and distorted and now, as a resurgent nation, rising from our valley of dry bones, we must knit together a cohesive story of who we are as a people, where we come from and who we are now. It is the story of our existence, our travails and our triumphs. This is our cohesive narrative that must be sensitively put together as we chart our pathway to a future where we are recognised and restored.<sup>65</sup>

The more ‘cohesive story’ Khoisan calls for links the present-day trials and tribulations of coloureds with those experienced by the Khoisan, who were the first to encounter European settler. Like many others, he regularly refers to the victory by the Khoisan over Portuguese general Francisco de Almeida in 1510 in this context, as it situates the origins of the ‘liberation struggle’ centuries prior to the ANC’s establishment. Similarly, notable figures and precolonial ways of life are frequently highlighted as a means of providing a moral compass in the present and instilling pride in one’s roots. The editors of *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, for instance, celebrated Krotoa in this manner as a ‘heroic

61. ‘Mondstuk vir eerste nasie se stories, kwessies’, *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, July 2013, 8.

62. Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism*, 5.

63. Interview with T. Kleinhans-Cedras, Cape Town, South Africa, 3 January 2015.

64. Interview with Z. Khoisan, Cape Town, South Africa, 7 May 2018.

65. Z. Khoisan, ‘Building a Cohesive Narrative’, *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, December 2014, 6.



figure, brilliant linguist and [...] one of the founding mothers of modern South Africa'.<sup>66</sup>

Propelled by social media, this discourse on indigeneity and empowerment has reached an unprecedented audience. Prominent coloureds have endorsed the campaign for the recognition of the Khoisan as indigenous people, such as Peter Marais, who previously held the positions of mayor of Cape Town and premier of the Western Cape province.<sup>67</sup> The Zuma administration also provided fertile ground for the proliferation of these ideas. For reasons that remain opaque but might have something to do with a 2010 petition to parliament that was co-sponsored by IRASA, Zuma announced during his 2013 State of the Nation Address that he would reopen the land claims process in part to accommodate the Khoisan.<sup>68</sup> Two large-scale land claims were initiated by Khoisan communities in the Northern Cape province in 1999 and 2003, which were upheld because the disposessions in question had occurred after 1913. Yet the Khoisan self-identification as indigenous people held no legal sway in these cases.<sup>69</sup> Indigeneity-based arguments were also dismissed during the 'National Khoi-San Dialogues' in Kimberley in April 2013 and April 2014 following Zuma's announcement. Khoisan representatives suggested the scrapping of the 1913 cut-off date and the recognition of their heritage sites, but the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform instead recommended prioritising the Khoisan in the land redistribution programme – even though this had already been suggested in a 1997 white paper and is already possible for under the current constitution.<sup>70</sup> Since 2014, however, few tangible results have emerged in respect of either land redistribution or the preservation of heritage sites. The Khoisan had low expectations to begin with since Bredekamp's suggested 'Khoisan Heritage Route' had been green-lighted by the government in 1999 but had yet to leave the drawing board.<sup>71</sup> One attendee felt utterly deceived, convinced that the government never seriously considered changing the 1913 cut-off date and wanted to negotiate with 'coloureds' rather than indigenous people.<sup>72</sup>

Many also deemed land negotiations premature as the Khoisan and their traditional leaders remained without an official statute. The Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act was only passed in February 2019, and it would take years

66. Z. Khoisan and D. Hendriks, 'Krotoa – Early Diplomat, Brilliant Linguist', *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, July 2016, 10.

67. W. Meyer, 'Peter Marais on Shades of Brown', *Independent Online*, 14 July 2014, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/peter-marais-on-shades-of-brown-1719329>, accessed 3 October 2022.

68. 'Petition on Complaints about Land Claims on Behalf of Western Cape Land Restitution Group: Update', *Parliamentary Monitoring Group*, 3 August 2010, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/11777/>, accessed 3 October 2022.

69. K. Lehmann, 'To Define or Not to Define: The Definitional Debate Revisited', *American Indian Law Review*, 31, 2 (2007), 511–522.

70. Department of Land Affairs, *White Paper on South African Land Policy April 1997* (Pretoria: Department of Land Affairs, 1997).

71. Interview with H. Bredekamp, Cape Town, South Africa 18 December 2018.

72. J. Cloete, 'Ons is nie regering se fools', *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, Julie 2013, 6.

before the first Khoisan leaders would receive official accreditation. Moreover, in March 2022 the act was found unconstitutional because not enough public consultation had taken place.<sup>73</sup> The future of the act remains uncertain, but it is worth closer examination as it is the first piece of legislation that explicitly seeks to recognise Khoisan leadership. The Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act stipulates quite precisely the criteria for state-funded membership in local, provincial, and national ‘houses of traditional and Khoi-San leaders’ for terms of five years, entailing ceremonial and advisory roles. Many Khoisan revivalists point out that the act’s requirement to prove historical continuity as regards self-identification, geographical presence, and ‘customs and customary law’ ignores the uniquely devastating legacies of the Khoisan past, even if it also provides for elected leaders based on community-support.<sup>74</sup> To the revivalists’ dismay, the act upholds different hierarchies for Khoisan and ‘traditional leaders’. The practical implications of these differences remain unclear, except that only the Khoisan will need to provide a yearly updated list of members along with their explicit consent to be enumerated as such.<sup>75</sup> While President Cyril Ramaphosa celebrated the act for granting ‘statutory recognition to [...] one of South Africa’s indigenous groups’, this only deals with traditional leadership and makes explicit that it does not grant anyone ‘indigenous, first nation or any other similar status’.<sup>76</sup> Lastly, the final decision regarding recognition, remuneration, and the content of advisory roles lies with the national minister of cooperative governance and traditional affairs and the premier of the province in question – institutions that activists like Zenzile Khoisan feel have a historical animus towards Khoisan revivalists.<sup>77</sup> There is a similar concern that the Commission on Khoi-San Matters, which will vet applications, has already secretly determined who will be recognised and who will not. When this commission held a public meeting in Cape Town on 28 June 2022 to explain its mandate, I witnessed how officials were repeatedly interrupted and dismissed, which serves to illustrate the extent of opposition to the act amongst Khoisan revivalists.

Regardless of how many groups will apply to the Commission on Khoi-San Matters, which has reportedly continued to log applications despite facing various financial and bureaucratic hurdles with the act’s uncertain status,

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73. T. Broughton, ‘Not Enough Public Participation: Constitutional Court Scraps Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act’, *News24*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/not-enough-public-participation-constitutional-court-scraps-traditional-and-khoi-san-leadership-act-20230530>, accessed 4 July 2023.

74. ‘Presentation of the National Khoe and San Ubiqua Kingdom on the Traditional and Khoisan Leadership Bill 2015’, *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, March 2017, 13; Government of South Africa, *Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act*, 8, 10, 20.

75. *Ibid.*, 12, 18–20, 24.

76. *Ibid.*, 10; C. Ramaphosa, Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Annual Opening of the National House of Traditional Leaders, Parliament, Cape Town (Pretoria: Government of South Africa, 2019).

77. Government of South Africa, *Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act*, 48, 64, 68, 96; Interview with Z. Khoisan, Cape Town, South Africa, 24 May 2018.

infighting amongst Khoisan revivalists is likely to persist.<sup>78</sup> The splintering of the movement has accelerated dramatically in anticipation of potential benefits tied to land and traditional leadership-related developments. While the Khoisan organisations mushrooming across Cape Town tend to be short-lived and without an up-to-date social media page or website, making it challenging to ascertain their support base, goals, or funding, they are clearly at loggerheads over who should lead the movement and negotiate with the government.<sup>79</sup> The National Khoi-San Council faces the brunt of the criticism, given that it was established with the support of the South African government. Chantal Revell, the National Khoi-San Council's representative for the Western Cape, explained to me that despite having their own strained relationship with the government and holding elections to recruit amongst the rising ranks of Cape Town activists in 2012, members of the National Khoi-San Council are frequently branded as sell-outs.<sup>80</sup> In her view, the government foments this discontent by failing to provide the National Khoi-San Council with sufficient funding to communicate with their constituents and being vague about its future during the drafting stage of the act. For example, during the aforementioned National Khoi-San Dialogues, the Department of Rural Development and Land Affairs established what it called a 'Reference Group' comprising Khoisan representatives, with the objective that they would suggest policy changes. The Reference Group therefore competed directly with the National Khoi-San Council, although it soon became dysfunctional because of internal discord. For Revell, the persistent internal strife is disheartening, as most Khoisan revivalists recognise that they would be much more effective as a united entity. She also suggested that disunity provided the government with a convenient scapegoat when stalling policy negotiations.

It would appear that Khoisan politics have once again reached an impasse. Some Khoisan revivalists blame the South African government, others the infighting. The Covid-19 pandemic also prompted different priorities. However, there have been noteworthy developments as well. Khoisan revivalism's intellectual trajectory is arguably coming full circle, with activists increasingly publishing history books where they present their interpretations of their past.<sup>81</sup> The academic critique of colonialist representations of the Khoisan has also flourished. June Bam and Yvette Abrahams, both academic historians and long-standing Khoisan activists, were pivotal in establishing the Khoi and San

78. FNN, 'Financial, Human Resources Hampers Khoi-San Commission', *Inheemse Spoor/First Nation News*, June 2024, 12–13.

79. Sato, 'Khoisan Revivalism and Land Question', 200–206.

80. Interview with C. Revell, Cape Town, South Africa, 7 October 2014.

81. See, for example, Coetzee, *Tears of the Praying Mantis*; R. Richards, *Bastaards or Humans? The Unspoken Heritage of Coloured People*, vol. 1 (Sunnyvale: Indaba Publishing, 2019). For a more thorough discussion of Khoisan-authored history books and how they differ from the extant literature, see R. Verbuyst, *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 173–187.

Centre at the University of Cape Town, which opened its doors in September 2020.<sup>82</sup> The Centre strives to collaborate closely with local communities in order to ‘foreground erased or marginalised indigenous knowledge, rituals, language, and “ways of knowing of the San and Khoi”’.<sup>83</sup> Following public hearings in Gauteng, the Western Cape and the Northern Cape between 2015 and 2017, the South African Human Rights Commission released a damning report in 2018 that supported numerous grievances raised by the Khoisan community relating to land and coloured identity, amongst other matters.<sup>84</sup> However, the impact of the report on policy changes has thus far been limited. A more tangible outcome may result from a groundbreaking agreement, signed in November 2019, between the National Khoi-San Council, the South African San Council, and the South African Rooibos Council, under the supervision of the Department of Environmental Affairs. The ‘rooibos agreement’ grants Khoisan ‘traditional knowledge holders’ 1.5 per cent of proceeds from rooibos sales.<sup>85</sup> While this amounts to a substantial cash flow, some have argued that the negotiations leading up to the agreement were characterised by a lack of transparency, representation, and awareness of deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, when the National Khoi-San Council convened a public meeting in Cape Town in August 2019 to solicit input on how to use this anticipated funding, several Khoisan revivalists asserted that the meeting was illegitimate on the grounds that rooibos fell beyond the scope of the National Khoi-San Council’s original mandate. Nevertheless, in June 2024, the National Khoi-San Council published an official call for applications for projects pertaining to socio-economic empowerment, education, healthcare, and cultural development, amongst others.<sup>87</sup>

Evidently, a considerable number of Khoisan revivalists are increasingly frustrated with the pace and method of policy negotiations. As Zenzile Khoisan observes, the next generation might not stick to peaceful means for

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82. See, for example, Bam, *Ausi Told Me*; Y. Abrahams, ‘Was Eva Raped? An Exercise in Speculative History’, *Kronos*, 23 (1996), 3–21. For more on the Centre’s founding and its challenges, see J. Bam and R. Verbuyst, ‘Indigenous History, Activism, and the Decolonizing University: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Struggle over the Khoisan Past in Post-apartheid South Africa’, in B. Bevernage and L. Raphael, eds, *Professional Historians in Public: Old and New Roles Revisited* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 213–241.
  83. H. Swinger, ‘UCT Launches Milestone Khoi and San Centre’, 23 September 2020, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-/2020-09-23-uct-launches-milestone-khoi-and-san-centre>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  84. South African Human Rights Commission, *Report of the South African Human Rights Commission: National Hearing Relating to the Human Rights Situation of the Khoi-San in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Human Rights Commission, 2018).
  85. R. Wynberg, ‘San and Khoi Claim Benefits from Rooibos’, *Mail and Guardian*, 1 November 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-11-01-00-san-and-khoi-claim-benefits-from-rooibos/>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  86. R. Wynberg, S. Yves, and J. Bam, ‘How Access and Benefit Sharing Entrenches Inequity: The Case of Rooibos’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 49, 2 (2023), 589–610.
  87. First Nation News, ‘Proposals Now Open for Project-Funding’, *Inheemse Spoor/First Nation News*, June 2024, 11. In April 2023, a first payment of 12.5 million ZAR was reportedly paid to the ‘Khoi and San Council’, but the latter were at the time still working ‘proper guidelines’ on how to put that money to use. See ‘Fair Pay for Rooibos Tea’, *BBC Business Daily*, 4 April 2023, produced by J. Critcher, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct4n3b?partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-mobile>.

resolving disagreements.<sup>88</sup> It is difficult to ascertain whether the mounting impatience displayed by Khoisan revivalists signals a shift in the movement. It could be argued that the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act and the rooibos agreement represent a shift towards greater collaboration with the state. Then again, there is hardly any grassroots support for the act, and it is premature to ascertain the impact of the rooibos agreement on the majority of Khoisan revivalists. In the meantime, however, certain direct-action campaigns are reaching unprecedented proportions, with Khoisan revivalists seeking to break the impasse by directly challenging or circumventing the state through party politics, land occupations, and private sector partnerships. While the events in question are still unfolding at the time of writing, they are arguably signalling a new phase of Khoisan revivalism.

### From 2019: challenging and circumventing the state?

In the light of recent political developments, it is not surprising that the events discussed in this concluding section all pertain to claims to ancestral land. Land ownership has been a perennial source of contention in post-apartheid politics. However, the Khoisan stand out as a unique group in their assertion that they are South Africa's original inhabitants and, as such, the primary stakeholders in the land reform debate. By employing a range of arguments based on indigeneity, Khoisan revivalists have long sought to leverage arguments of prior occupancy to reclaim specific plots of land, assert ownership over certain natural resources, plead for greater access to heritage sites, or even lay claim to the whole of southern Africa.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, the South African government shows no intention of accommodating indigeneity-based land reform. The prevalent perception amongst the Khoisan that they are deliberately being sidelined was further intensified by Ramaphosa's 2018 State of the Nation Address, in which he affirmed his commitment to implement land expropriation without compensation. The precise manner in which this policy will be implemented remains unclear. However, it is widely understood to entail the transfer of white-owned agricultural property to landless and impoverished blacks.<sup>90</sup> Expropriation without compensation is framed as an effective means of dealing with South Africa's enduring racial inequalities because it circumvents the bureaucratic complexities that have, amongst other factors, hampered the land reform process thus far.<sup>91</sup> While the Khoisan could also benefit from fast-track land reform, many fear that they will be overlooked once again and that the land that they have been claiming for decades will be redistributed

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88. Interview with Z. Khoisan, Cape Town, South Africa, 12 June 2018.

89. Sato, 'Khoisan Revivalism and Land Question'.

90. A.O. Akinola, 'Land Reform in South Africa: Interrogating the Securitisation of Land Expropriation without Compensation', *Politikon*, 47, 2 (2020), 215–232.

91. O. Zenker, 'De-judicialization, Outsourced Review and All-too-flexible Bureaucracies in South African Land Restitution', *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 33, 1 (2015), 81–96.

to someone else.<sup>92</sup> Their pessimism might be warranted given that the relevant parliamentary committee indicated that '[r]ecognition of Khoisan as the First Nation and their historical ownership of land' does not fall within its remit.<sup>93</sup>

This has not diminished the importance of Khoisan claims of prior occupancy; on the contrary, various commentators have observed how rhetoric surrounding indigeneity is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst South Africans in general, particularly when land rights are being contested.<sup>94</sup> For Zenzile Khoisan, it is clear that political parties are increasingly seeking to 'hitch their wagon' to the Khoisan movement.<sup>95</sup> The support for Khoisan revivalism is related to a multitude of matters, ranging from self-determination to language rights – too many to engage with here – but the subject of land features across the political spectrum. The right-wing Freedom Front Plus party, for instance, put out advertisements in *Eerste Nasie Nuus* in 2013 and 2014 that endorsed the Khoisan as the country's undisputed indigenous people.<sup>96</sup> This recognition arguably represents an attempt at 'political geometry': if the Khoisan were designated indigenous people, then the white minority and the black majority would possess the same 'non-indigenous' claims to land.<sup>97</sup> Unsurprisingly, this interpretation of history is rejected by the Economic Freedom Fighters. Yet Julius Malema, the leader of this far-left political party, has also endorsed the Khoisan as indigenous people on various occasions, albeit for quite different reasons. He makes the point of emphasising that all (black) Africans are ultimately victims of colonialism and hence deserving of historical justice and greater land ownership in South Africa.<sup>98</sup>

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92. See, for example, B. Ndenze, 'Land Expropriation to Have Negative Impact on Khoi Community', *Eye-witness News*, 5 August 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220424192736/https://ewn.co.za/2018/08/05/land-expropriation-to-have-negative-impact-on-the-khoi-community>, accessed 12 November 2024.
  93. Ad Hoc Committee to Initiate and Introduce Legislation Amending Section 25 of the Constitution, 'Report on Public Participation on the Eighteenth Constitution Amendment Bill', Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, *Parliamentary Monitoring Group*, 16 April 2021, <https://pmg.org.za/tailed-committee-report/4541/>, accessed 3 October 2022.
  94. S. Koot, R. Hitchcock, and C. Gressier, 'Belonging, Indigeneity, Land and Nature in Southern Africa under Neoliberal Capitalism: An Overview', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 45, 2 (2019), 341–355; T. Kepe and R. Hall, 'Land Redistribution in South Africa: Towards Decolonisation or Recolonisation?', *Politikon*, 45, 1 (2018), 128–137; Rassool, 'The Politics of Nonracialism'. See also D. Van Zyl-Hermann and R. Verbuyst, '"The Real History of the Country"? Expropriation without Compensation and Competing Master Narratives about Land (Dis)possession in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48, 5 (2022), 825–842.
  95. Interview with Z. Khoisan, Cape Town, South Africa, 24 May 2018.
  96. See, for example, P. Mulder, 'Is vryheid moontlik vir KhoiSan?', *Eerste Nasie Nuus*, (July 2013), 7. It should be noted that the support between Afrikaner interest groups and the Khoisan goes back decades. See, for example, S. Douglas, 'The Human Isthmus: Dangerous Diluted Sewerage Poison ... Recuperating "Bushman" in the "New South Africa"', *Critical Arts*, 9, 2 (1995), 65–75.
  97. See L. Veracini and R. Verbuyst, 'South Africa's Settler-Colonial Present: Khoisan Revivalism and the Question of Indigeneity', *Social Dynamics*, 46, 2 (2020), 259–276. As one of the reviewers of this article indicated, because of their long historical reach, Khoisan land claims have the potential of Undermining not only those of whites and blacks but of all who were alienated from their land past the 1913 cut-off date, including coloureds.
  98. See, for example, 'Mr. Malema, You Have No Authority over Land', *News24*, 12 February 2016, <https://www.news24.com/News24/mr-malema-you-have-no-authority-over-land-20160212>, accessed 3 October 2022.



The Khoisan have also established their own political parties, though these have been short-lived and unsuccessful at the ballot box, with the possible exception of 'Khoisan Revolution', which was founded in 2016 by a member of the National Khoi-San Council and secured a single seat in the municipality of Springbok in the Northern Cape.<sup>99</sup> The Khoisan's electoral fortunes might turn as another member of the National Khoi-San Council successfully challenged the constitutionality of the Electoral Act, which bars independent candidates from standing for election.<sup>100</sup> The court case was headed by renowned advocate Allan Nelson and featured representatives from various other constituencies, including Mmusi Maimane, the former leader of the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance. Chantal Revell, who has her own political ambitions, explained to a reporter from *Netwerk24* that she had chosen to join the court case as the second applicant in order to challenge the state's policies towards the Khoisan: 'So that I can represent my own people. We are not politicians. We are a people [...] If we do not change the laws, nothing is going to improve for our people.'<sup>101</sup> The fact that Revell featured so prominently in the collective effort of pushing the court case underscores the increasing gravitas of indigeneity and the fact that Khoisan revivalists are exploring alternative avenues for recognition and redress.

This is similarly evident in another campaign where Revell is one of the protagonists: the Khoisan endorsement of the multibillion-rand real estate venture in Observatory, a suburb of Cape Town, frequently designated the 'River Club development' after the country club located on the site. The Khoisan were virtually unanimously opposed to these plans when their opinions were pooled during hearings that were held as part of the mandatory heritage impact assessment between 2018 and 2020.<sup>102</sup> They argued that the area in question is of historical significance and in need of protection, given its status as the site of the first wars of dispossession between the colonialists and the Khoisan, which took place in the seventeenth century. However, in November 2019, a group of Khoisan revivalists known as the Western Cape First Nations Collective, which includes prominent community leaders such as Revell, came out in support of the development, after having held several meetings with Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust, the main developer of the site.<sup>103</sup> In the words of Zenzile Khoisan, who heads the collective, the group undertook this

99. L. Jansen, 'South Africa', in K. Broch Hansen, K. Jepsen, and P. L. Jacquelin, eds, *The Indigenous World 2017* (Copenhagen: The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2017), 547–551.

100. J. de Lange, 'Die Khoi-San se prinses wat parlement toe wil gaan', *Netwerk24*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/politiek/prinses-mik-parlement-toe-vir-die-khoi-san-20220521>, accessed 3 October 2022.

101. *Ibid.*

102. S. Kretzmann, 'Fierce Battle over Future of River Club, a Landmark Cape Town Site', *Daily Maverick*, 27 November 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-27-fierce-battle-over-future-of-river-club-a-landmark-cape-town-site/>, accessed 3 October 2022.

103. 'Indigenous People are Actually in Favour of River Club Development', *The Citizen*, 28 November 2019, <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/opinion/indigenous-peoples-are-actually-in-favour-of-river-club-development/>, accessed 3 October 2022.



strategic act of indigenous cultural agency [...] [because] the developer, unlike any other government, corporate, or social entities with which we have engaged, has made a firm commitment to ensure that the footprint of the Khoi and San's history of resistance, and its modern-day resurgence is incorporated into the development plan [...] [which reportedly includes] a Heritage Centre, a functional indigenous garden and cultural praxis site and a world-first International Indigenous Media and Communication Centre.<sup>104</sup>

Whether the developers will honour their commitment remains to be seen. It is also important to acknowledge that the collective faces fierce opposition from other members of the Khoisan community. This counter-campaign is based on a range of matters that go beyond the focus of this article.<sup>105</sup> However, in the light of the historical trajectory of Khoisan revivalism, it is important to highlight that the collective's rationale for turning to private sector partnerships is that engagements with the South African government on matters of land and heritage were thus far frustratingly unproductive and unable to provide short-term tangible change. Moreover, regardless of its motivations for doing so, the Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust was not, legally speaking, obliged to engage with the Khoisan. This makes all the more remarkable the judgement in the Western Cape High Court on 18 March 2022 to temporarily halt construction of the River Club development because the 'fundamental rights of First Nations Peoples' were insufficiently taken into consideration.<sup>106</sup> The judgement was overturned on appeal and construction has since resumed. Regardless of how the River Club saga will conclude, it has already demonstrated how indigeneity is becoming a form of moral leverage that cannot be ignored.

Meanwhile, other Khoisan revivalists have claimed land by bypassing the South African state altogether. Previously, small-scale land occupations under the Khoisan banner have occurred, but the events at 'Knoflokskraal' near Grabouw, an hours' drive from Cape Town, are of an unprecedented scale.<sup>107</sup> In November 2020, a dozen Khoisan activists from various parts of the Western Cape set up tents on a plot of land near the N2 highway. The land is owned by the Department of Public Works but managed by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment.<sup>108</sup> The group, which refer to itself as 'Reclaimers' and which is supported by some of the Cape Town-based

104. Z. Khoisan, 'Why We, as Representatives of the First Nations, Support the River Club Development', *Daily Maverick*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-02-25-why-we-as-representatives-of-the-first-nations-support-the-river-club-development/>, accessed 3 October 2022.

105. For an overview of the different positions within this debate, see the various commentaries in the special issue of *New Agenda*, 79, 1 (2021).

106. Observatory Civic Association et al. v Trustees for the Time Being of Liesbeek Leisure Properties Trust et al. [2022] 12994/21, 77–79.

107. Jacobs and Levenson, 'The Limits of Coloured Nationalism'.

108. L. Human, 'Khoisan Settlement Edges Closer to Eviction from Forestry Department Land in Grabouw', *Daily Maverick*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-12-khoisan-settlement-edges-closer-to-eviction-from-forestry-department-land-in-grabouw/>, accessed 3 October 2020.

Khoisan revivalists mentioned earlier, justify their actions primarily by citing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the South African government has signed and which, amongst other things, recognises indigenous people's right to land.<sup>109</sup> The settlement extended rapidly as an increasing number of families from various parts of the Western Cape province and beyond arrived and cleared plots of their own. With this, the occupation spilled over on other state-owned land. Official estimates suggest a population of up to 4000 inhabitants. However, upon visiting the area and talking to some of the residents, many of whom fled crime and poor housing conditions in Cape Town, I realised that it is possible that many more people are staying at Knoflokskraal.<sup>110</sup> They all seemed undaunted by the constant threat of eviction. Indeed, whereas 'King' Cornelius' secession enjoyed little support amongst Khoisan revivalists, the growing number of residents at Knoflokskraal suggests that these types of land occupations are widely endorsed.<sup>111</sup>

Further studies are required to determine whether Khoisan political parties or independent candidates can garner significant support, whether partnerships with the private sector are widely endorsed, and whether the Khoisan are willing to occupy land in large numbers. Additional research into the backgrounds of Khoisan revivalists could reveal interesting contrasts and parallels with the historical trajectory of the movement presented here, whether involving rank-and-file members or leaders within the movement. All the while, it is evident that Khoisan revivalists are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of meaningful action on the part of the South African government in dealing with their core grievances. The state persists in engaging with the Khoisan population in a manner that is opaque and evasive, articulating positions that are unclear, and enacting policies that enjoy only limited grassroots support. In this sense, the mission of Khoisan revivalism remains unfulfilled. However, while the odds were stacked against the early Khoisan revivalists who asserted themselves in the South African body politic and the academic landscape, they are clearly becoming more politically and intellectually entrenched. It is a testament to their success that the term 'revival' is rapidly becoming obsolete.

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109. L. Human, 'Plan to Create "Khoisan Orania" in Grabouw: Western Cape High Court to Decide Fate of Knoflokskraal', *GroundUp*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/grabouw-occupiers-want-to-create-sovereign-khoisan-community/>, accessed 3 October 2020.

110. 'Land Invasions at "Knoflokskraal" Site in the Grabouw Plantation; with Minister', *Parliamentary Monitoring Group*, 13 September 2022, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/35532/>, accessed 3 October 2020.

111. Besent, 'Khomani San Distance Themselves'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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