

## THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD "HOTTENTOT"

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The origin of the word "Hottentot" constitutes one of the most vexed problems of South African Philology. It has often been treated and the balance of opinion is in favour of deriving it from Nederlands. Both the late Professor J. du Plessis and the author of the present article, however, have agreed in supporting another point of view.

In his first paper, (*South African Journal of Science*, 1917, pp. 189-193), du Plessis failed to convince most philologists, including myself. But it will always stand to his credit that, in his second paper read at the Durban meeting of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science (*Journal*, 1932, pp. 663), he brought to light a forgotten passage of the old French traveller Beaulieu, who visited the Cape in March 1620. Of the Natives, he recorded that "their usual greeting on meeting us is to dance to a song, the beginning, the middle and the end of which is *hautitou*" ("leur salut ordinaire en nous rencontrant est de danser une chanson dont le commencement, les parties et la fin est *hautitou*," "Mémoires du voyage aux Indes orientales du général Beaulieu," Paris, 1664, p. 9). I quote the original French in view of the importance of the text and also because du Plessis did not have access to it, using instead the English and Dutch versions.

He also showed, in the same paper, by means of excerpts from the Dutch or German travellers Merklein (1653), Heeck (1655) and Saar (1660), that the word "Hottentot" was regularly used by the aborigines as the burden of their songs and further concluded that "*Hottentoo*, in spite of the intrusive *n* (probably euphonic) may be legitimately derived from *houtitou* or *hatitou*, in which form there was not improbably a click" (op. cit. p. 665). He did not, however, explain the precise process whereby *hottentoo* was derived from *hautitou*.

In the ensuing discussion and also in my Review of the "Early Cape Hottentots" (*Bantu Studies*, Vol. iii (1934) p. 100), I pointed out that the *hautitou* of Beaulieu was most probably a misprint for *hontitou*, *u* and *n* being frequently confused by a printer ignorant of the Native language,

as all editors of Native texts have learned to their cost. I further demonstrated that *hontiton*, thus restored, is phonetically *hōlitō* or, better still, *ōlitō* (as in the French of Beaulieu's period the *h* would probably be silent)—a form which corresponds exactly with *ōitōitō*, which I have often heard the Korana Hottentots use as a song burden during my visits at Bloemhof, the home of these Korana.

To the discussion carried thus far, we shall now add a series of new facts, and, in an attempt to arrive at a definite solution of the problem, it will be essential to place them in their proper perspective. The first set of these facts concerns the different appellations used by the very early travellers to denote the aborigines of the Cape. We are told by Theophilus Hahn, for instance, that "on account of their curious language abounding in harsh faecal sounds and clicks, the Dutch called them Hottentots. Hottentot or Hüttentüt means in Frisian or Low Dutch a quack, therefore the old Dutchmen, who were so much puzzled and did not know what to make of such an unheard-of language, more akin to the chat of a parrot than to human speech, called it Hottentot—i.e., mere gibberish," (*Tsumi-|| goam*, London, 1881, p. 2). Such an etymology has always left me unconvinced. Why should the Dutch seamen apply to the halting tones of a language or to its speakers their word for quack? The necessary connection between the one and the other concepts seems to be entirely lacking. We shall, however, revert to this etymology of Hahn at a later stage.

What is of greater importance, in the present connection, is to try to trace the early usage of these travellers and to see what conclusions the facts will allow us to draw. The first Portuguese mariners consistently called the aborigines "Negros" (Vasco da Gama, 1497; the historian of the wreck of the São João Baptista, 1622; De Barros, *Asia*). The Frenchmen Beaulieu (1620) and de Flacourt (1648) call them "savages" ("sauvages.") The English captains, in their letters to the East India Company (1602-1614), variously use "savages," "Saldanians," "barbarians," and even "Indian," while Lancaster (1591) says "Negroes," Davis (1598) "people" and Hore (1619) "salvages." It is also a fact worthy of our notice that Sir Thomas Herbert in the first edition of his *Some Yeares' Travels into . . . Asia and Afrique* (1638) has no special name for them, while in a subsequent edition (1677) he introduced the term *Hatten-totes*.

The Dutch, too, have no special term in the earliest times. Thus Frank van der Does, one of the historians of the first Dutch expedition to the East Indies, led by Cornelius de Houtman (1595), speaks of the

"inwoonderen," as do also Admiral Pieter Both (1601) and Joris van Spilbergen (1601). It is in the year 1652 that we witness a veritable blossoming forth of the word: *Ottentoo* in a despatch of Jan van Teylingen (25 February) and in the *Dagverhaal* of van Riebeeck, *Hottento* in a piece of poetry signed "Anno 1652, in Amsterdam, J. J. Wissing" and finally *Hottentot* in Hondius' *Klare ende Korte Beschryvinge*. In view of these facts it is safe to conclude that it was the Dutch who introduced the term. The comparison of the two editions of Herbert quoted above is clear testimony in this respect.

This leads us to the further conclusion that the word derived from the song burden of the Natives of the Cape of Good Hope was introduced in the form *Ottentoo* from there into the Dutch language. It is to be noticed that the later form *Hottentot* is used for the first time by the compiler Hondius who had had no direct personal contact with the Cape. There does not appear to be any evidence to prove the existence of *Hüttentüt* or similar words in Dutch before the beginning of the xviii<sup>th</sup> century (or possibly 1668, in Dapper's work). Otherwise there would be a strong probability that the song burden was adopted as the designation of the tribes round about the Cape by the Dutch under the influence of what linguists call "popular etymology," i.e. the existence of *Hüttentüt* or similar words conditioned the entrance of *Ottentoo* into the language, modifying its phonetic appearance and its meaning.

This was my position since 1932, when Professor Leo Fouché, of the University of the Witwatersrand, asked me last year to examine some MSS. in his possession, which had belonged to Theophilus Hahn and it is due to his kind permission that I am now able to publish what I consider a document of primary importance in this discussion. Among the papers I discovered a letter of C. F. Wuras, the founder of the Berlin Mission at Bethany among the Korana of the Free State and a well-known authority on this branch of the Hottentot nation. As the German text is reproduced here, I shall now give only the English translation of relevant portion of the MS. which is dated the 10th September 1879 and is addressed to Hahn: "You conjecture that the name 'Hottentot' was given by the Europeans because of their peculiar idiom, etc. You may be right. But my opinion differs from yours in this matter and I may be wrong. The Hottentots, among whom I reckon the Korana—I mean not the present-day Korana, but the old ones—greatly loved dancing. In the earlier days dancing among the Korana was the order of the day; their dancing consists in stamping with their feet and gesticulating with their hands, while they sing to the time which they beat with their feet. It was approximately a 2/4 beat: *āten tāten*. Now I postulate that the

Europeans during their stay at the Cape used to hear them sing this 2/4 beat every evening and gave them on this account the name Hottentot."

It is rather amusing that I should find confirmation of the explanation I propounded in 1932 in a document of nearly sixty years old. Wuras and I at the two extreme points of this space of time observed exactly the same thing and interpreted the observation in exactly the same way. It is also curious that Hahn who was in possession of this first-hand information in 1879 does not mention it in his book of 1881, presumably because it disturbed his preconceived notions on the subject.

With the discovery of this document which confirms unequivocally my views, I have no occasion to change my position of 1932 in which du Plessis' penetrating intuition played such an important part. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that the solution offered here is final.

*Note I.* This 2/4 beat is characteristic of Korana music. Cp. Kirby, P.R.—The Music and Musical Instruments of the Korana in *Bantu Studies*, Vol. VI (1932), No. 5, p. 198 and No. 7, p. 199-200.

*Note II.* References to the names used by the earliest travellers to designate the Native inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope :

1. Vasco da Gama.—*Le voyage de Vasco da Gama*, tr. Morelet, Lyon, 1864, pp. 8-10.
2. *Tratado do successo que teve a nao Saõ Joaõ Baptista*, Lisbon, 1625, pp. 13 ff.
3. Beaulieu, in *Mémoires du voyage aux Indes orientales du général Beaulieu*, Paris, 1664, p. 8.
4. de Flacourt, E.—*Histoire de la Grande Isle de Madagascar*, Paris, 1661, pp. 245ff, p. 394.
5. *Letters received by the East India Company*, 3 Vols., London, 1896, etc. Vol. II., pp. 180, 330 ; Vol. III, pp. 2, 46, 295-296.
6. Lancaster in Hakluyt, R.—*The principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English*, Glasgow, 1905, Vol. VI, p. 389.
7. Davis in *Purchase his Pilgrimes*, Ed. 1905, Vol. II, p. 308.
8. Hore, *ibid*, Vol. V, p. 85.
9. The earliest Dutch travellers in Godée-Molsbergen.—*Reizen in Zuid-Afrika*, Vol. I, (1916), pp. 4-9.

*Note III.* It is only some months after his arrival at the Cape that van Riebeeck uses the form *Hottentot* (*Dagverhael*, Vol I., p. 61 : 29 September 1652). But even then he shows a definite tendency to revert later to the form *Ottentoo* (Cp. *ibid*, p. 78 : 21 October 1652 ; p. 80 : 23 October 1652) and hereafter *Hottentoo* is the regular form for some considerable time.