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THE HUMAN ISTHMUS: Dangerous Diluted Sewerage Poison¹

...recuperating 'bushman' in the 'New South Africa'

Stuart Douglas

The information that I received outlining what this edition of *Critical Arts* was to be about began with the statement: "The 'New' South Africa has recuperated a different, affirmative image of the San, in comparison to the negative, prejudiced representation of 'bushmen' (read 'bushman') previously popularised by pro-apartheid media....The new image...projects the San as the bridge between the past and the future". The underlying premise upon which my argument rests is that being regarded as Bushmen invariably means being seen to be 'bushman', but the appropriation of 'bushman' is not something confined to Bushmen. As such, this paper is a theoretical discussion that indirectly examines what under scrutiny becomes an increasingly disconcerting rhetorical transmutation - that of 'bushman', being depicted, in conservative wrapping, as inevitably and necessarily tied to people currently resident at Schmidtsdrift, Northern Cape Province, South Africa. In political speak, 'bushman', as a bridge, a connection, not through time, but *over* time, out of time, has emerged as an isthmus that does not transcend people loosely labelled Bushmen.

Furthermore, the suggestion, in the opening quotation, that 'San' is an affirmative referent, whereas 'bushman' is unavoidably jaundiced, is fallacious. This paper is foregrounded in the conviction that attempting to dismiss 'bushman' while embracing 'San' seems to be a case of trying to take the San from the bush(man) whilst forgetting that it is impossible to take the bush(man) away from the San.

There is, at face value, no apparent nor necessary problem with people engaging in the imaging and imagining of 'First People'. However, in the contemporary politically charged context of the 'New South Africa',

Stuart Douglas is a Masters student in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town.

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such fancifulness, inventiveness and projection invariably overflows in informative and invariably problematic ways. The utilisation of the 'First People' ideograph as a representation of a 'future perfect', as a conjunctive social, cultural and political metonym and metaphor, is discussed with reference to people who are recurrently labelled Bushmen, and who presently reside at Schmidtsdrift.

Crucially, 'bushman' and bushmanness (or Sanness, for that matter)² is an ambiguous resource and rhetorical flag, around which people rally or mobilise for political purposes. As such, and in agreement with Voss, (1990: 59) bushmanness, 'First Peopleness', archetypal Otherness, "is a function of social forces, a matter of historical conjuncture". 'Bushman' articulates a range of ideological precepts that are open to manipulation, both by people classified Bushmen, and equally, by people aligned with the political Right or Left. On this score the notion of 'bushman' being a bridge between the past and the future in a post-apartheid South Africa is not an inherently progressive idea. There is nothing necessarily positive about this isthmatic idiom at all.

Schmidtsdrift Bushmen - the locus of Left and Right

What I wish to illustrate here, is that the notion of excavating an "original culture...to facilitate a South African path to a future beyond apartheid" (Tomaselli 1993: 82) is open to use by both the politically progressive and conservative. To think of 'bushman' as a historical and political vinculum is, perhaps unfortunately, potentially to ensnare people currently thought to be Bushmen in a vortex of ideological associations in which they do not necessarily want a part.

In mid-April 1994, the conservative Afrikaner political party, the Freedom Front, arrived, uninvited, at Schmidtsdrift on one of its many stops during pre-election campaigning in the Northern Cape Province. Freedom Front leader, Karel Boshoff, chaired an election rally in which the salient message conveyed was that the interests of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen were, in many respects, the same as those of the Afrikaner Right Wing. Both groups of people, according to the Freedom Front, were seeking self-determination in the form of state sanctioned political and territorial integrity. A news report on national television showed Boshoff urging Schmidtsdrift Bushmen to vote for his political party on the basis that the Bushmen shared the Freedom Front's conviction in the

importance of a *volkstaat* ('homeland') as a formalised locale, a politically legitimated spatial locus of cultural and ethnic exclusivity. Many of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen with whom I spoke during fieldwork in late 1994 and early 1995, said that they found the Freedom Front's idea of landed cultural integrity imminently sensible, but thought it a safer bet to vote for their long-time cohorts, the National Party.

Roughly contemporaneous with the Freedom Front's uneasy but brief presence at Schmidtsdrift, was intense debate by the independent Trust at Schmidtsdrift (an ostensibly progressive, Leftist body charged with the responsibility of assuming and redirecting the functions and role previously fulfilled by the South African Defence Force) around the issue of the future resettlement of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen³. Factored into this was the ground-line assumption that cultural protectionism was in order; at the risk of repetition, to talk about Bushmen invariably leads to speaking in terms of 'bushman'.

In late July 1994, The United Nations Working Group for Indigenous People met in Geneva. This United Nations convention was attended by a delegation from Schmidtsdrift, and, perhaps surprisingly, a delegation from the Freedom Front, amongst others. The Freedom Front justified its presence at the United Nations convention on indigenous people on the basis that Afrikaners, like people termed Bushmen, constituted an indigenous, aboriginal South African group.

Two Bushmen representatives from Schmidtsdrift gave brief presentations at this United Nations conference. The Afrikaner Right Wingers, quite wisely, kept a low profile and did not present nor formally state their case. The Schmidtsdrift Bushmen presentations were written by the independent Trust. What follows are two short extracts from these presentations. The first presentation, concerned with human rights issues surrounding ex-Angolan and ex-Namibian Bushmen, many of whom served in the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the Namibian liberation war, contained the following:

Our first goal is to obtain land on which we can settle and where we can develop in a manner that is conducive to our cultural requirements. Without our own land we are essentially non-people and will be unable to develop our own identity.

The second presentation, couched under the rubric of cultural survival, had this to say:

We need to be separate from other people. We can work peacefully with all races and peoples, but...have a strong desire to own our own land, and to determine our own laws, customs and lives.

It is important to realise that both of these extracts could, with equal validity and quite plausibly, be taken from the discourse espoused by Right Wing *volkstaters* (and even Inkatha or Zulu nationalists).

The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations has defined indigenous people or aboriginals as people who

...are descendants of groups which were in the territory of the country at the time when other groups of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived there...(who) are isolated from other segments of the country's population and have preserved almost intact the customs and traditions of their ancestors which are similar to those characterised as indigenous, and...(who) are, even if only formally, placed under a state structure which incorporates national, social and cultural characteristics alien to theirs (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs 1994: 165).

Again it is important to note how readily some of the above-mentioned criteria can be applied to Right Wing *volkstaters* and the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen. Let me elaborate. The issue of descent is, technically, a difficult one to argue. Conservative Afrikaners may, with some degree of difficulty, argue that large tracts of South Africa were uninhabited when they occupied regions in the central interior of South Africa. Furthermore, they may tentatively assert that many of the areas that they colonised were inhabited by Khoisan who have no actual, unequivocal, living descendants in South Africa. As a result, *volkstaters* may choose to state that they are the 'next in line', so to speak, who can convincingly trace descent, albeit over a short time span. Moreover, conservative Afrikaners might argue that they occupied parts of the sub-continent before the arrival of Bantu-speaking people.

But perhaps most importantly, the new South African Government of National Unity has stipulated that it will consider land redistribution and compensation for *groups* of people who were adversely affected by the Land Act of 1913, and by subsequent discriminatory and segregationist legislation (primarily with reference to the 1936 Land Act). 1913 has thus been identified as a highly significant ideological marker, and the Freedom Front has consistently expounded, with reference to this temporal benchmark, that Afrikaners are as indigenous as any other southern African socio-political group from that time forward; that their claims to resources based on descent are, at worst, of equal value to 'Others' (non-Afrikaners, including Bushmen).

It may, ironically, be more difficult for the Bushmen of Schmidtsdrift to lay claim to aboriginality, to promulgate their status as a supposedly indigenous South African population group, on the basis of descent. It may be possible to argue that Bushmen from northern Namibia and Angola have descendants in South Africa, but such an assertion would be highly speculative, relying on what may be construed as conjectural and highly ambivalent historical associations. Of course, given that the Bushmen currently resident at Schmidtsdrift have a long history of occupation in parts of Angola and Namibia, and that they entered South Africa as recently as 1990, they would be in an extremely weak position to claim direct descent from people who were resident in South Africa subsequent to 1913.

The second point raised in the above-cited United Nations definition of 'indigenous' is that of isolation and cultural continuity. Once again, Right Wingers may contend that they, as a collectivity, have remained largely isolated and culturally distinct. This can be argued, quite coherently and logically, I think, by strangely inverting apartheid practices and discourse; by claiming that 'separate development' and segregationist policies invariably served to keep Afrikaners very much secluded. To illustrate a continuity of Afrikaner customs and traditions on this basis would not be too difficult.

The Schmidtsdrift Bushmen are, in many ways isolated from much of South Africa's population, and this has also been the case historically due to their fledgling status as South African nationals. Furthermore, given their recent military history and strong army associations, the customs and traditions of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen are, in significant ways, starkly

dissimilar to those that are deemed indigenous, let alone historically continuous (that is 'real bushman culture').

The final notion of alienation that emerges in the United Nations definition of 'indigenous' is relatively easy to assert in the case of Afrikaners, particularly subsequent to the Nationalist government's fall from power following the 1994 general election. But Afrikaners do still have representatives in government, participants in state structures that are not altogether foreign. Bushmen at Schmidtsdrift can likewise claim that they too are experiencing political and social alienation in the 'New South Africa'. Many Schmidtsdrift Bushmen did, in conversation, intimate precisely such estrangement. The Schmidtsdrift Bushmen do not have the same sort of national political representation that Afrikaners have, and state structures may well be foreign to them, as they are for very many 'Other' South Africans.

In light of the ambiguous and broad definition of 'indigenous' - a definition that clearly 'cuts both ways' politically - the Freedom Front identified (and identifies) the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen as a potential, albeit seemingly strange, bedfellow. By association, the *volkstaters* have intimated, and continue to suggest, that the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen are an ally who could add credence to their demands for self-determination. If the South African Government of National Unity concedes to making provision for people *because they are Bushmen and hence 'bushman'*, in the name of Bushmen 'cultural survival', by providing the Schmidtsdrift people with a dedicated tract of land for such purposes it will, in all likelihood, have to face demands for similar treatment from the Right. The Right Wing *volkstaters* recognise that if the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen receive any concessions premised upon their bushmanness - on the basis of supposed cultural uniqueness - then, by expediently manipulating an ephemeral, but fundamental ideological link, they may be able exploit the salient global discourse of aboriginal rights.

This is reiterated by the fact that in late May 1995, at the time of a resurgence of conservative Afrikaner calls for a *volkstaat*, a conference was organised by a Right Wing organisation, the 'Africa Indigenous People's Council' (AIPC), of which the Freedom Front is apparently the principle stalwart. Invitations to attend this conference, which was premised on making a concerted effort to "promote the interests of indigenous (southern African) people" (*Mail and Guardian*, 26 May to 1 June 1995).

were extended to Inkatha and the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen, as well as to a vast array of 'Other' groups. This clever, opportunist attempt to yet again appropriate 'bushman' by the Right Wing echoes what Tomaselli (1993: 82) identifies as Jamie Uys's overarching concern in *The Gods Must be Crazy* films: "attempting to restore the idea of cultural purity and isolation by mobilising Western myths about the San ('bushman') as metaphors for Afrikaners".

It is worth mentioning that the argument from the Left *against* Afrikaner Right Wing claims to aboriginality could acquire considerable credibility if it was emphasised that the Bushmen at Schmidtsdrift have consistently been members of a southern African proletariat or lower class. Afrikaners on the Right, or *volkstaters*, have generally been members of the bourgeoisie or middle- and upper classes in the subcontinent. The historically uneven distribution of political and economic power plays favourably into the hands of people labelled Bushmen. However, and this is crucial, the political Right in South Africa is not homogeneous and does not, of course, simply consist of Afrikaner *volkstaters*. Groups such as the *Kleurling Weerstand Beweging* to some extent, but Inkatha to a far greater extent, could far more convincingly and expediently adopt 'bushman', appropriate indigenousness or 'First Peopleness'; far more successfully exploit ideological and rhetorical alliances with those classified Bushmen, than Afrikaners. Power differentials on this level of association - when looking at Inkatha, Coloured separatist groups, and the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen - are not easy to tease apart.

But, to return to the AIPC 'indigenous indaba' (*Mail and Guardian* 26 May to 1 June 1995) scheduled for the end of May 1995, the Schmidtsdrift independent Trust declined the invite, and no one from Schmidtsdrift attended it. It appears as if the Trust and people at Schmidtsdrift have begun to distance themselves from efforts to secure resources on the basis of their ineluctable bushmanness (as 'bushman'). In terms of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen's *own* proclamations of who and what they are, the 'First People' rhetoric of early and mid-1994 seems to be falling by the wayside. The terms !Xu and Khwe have been adopted as the salient referential categories, and Bushmen has, at least formally, been dropped. In fact, during ethnographic fieldwork in late 1994, early 1995, many informants at Schmidtsdrift stressed their disdain of the labels Bushmen and San. They were adamant: being classified and described

as Bushmen and/or San was nothing short of derogatory, a form of blatant racism.

However, contemporaneous with the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen's nascent reservations about mobilising bushmanness - their hesitation about redeeming, reclaiming, 'First Peopleness' - the ANC government began to consider relocation of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen in precisely these terms. The Department of Land Affairs has, as of late, assumed sole responsibility on an overarching political level for the future resettlement of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen. Derrick Hanekom, the Minister of Land Affairs, has until recently been using the popular author and naturalist, Louis Liebenberg, as his 'expert advisor' with regard to addressing the predicament of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen in a 'culturally sensitive' way. Liebenberg has apparently recommended that the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen be treated in accordance with their 'cultural uniqueness and fragility'. The South African political Left has thus been entertaining, and to some extent *recuperating*, the popular nostalgic and sentimentalist image of 'bushman' that is intertwined with the 'First People' idiom that lends itself so conveniently to appropriation by the Right (Liebenberg, 1990) for an example of, and a clearer perspective on, romantic mythologising about bushmanness).

An extenuating factor with regard to ANC redistribution initiatives, in particular in relation to land restitution, is that the ANC-led Government of National Unity has stated that it is prepared to consider *group* claims to land only. Such an approach lends itself to cultural reification and essentialism, to the overt and explicit political manipulation of ideas of collective, ethnic, exclusivity, which may in turn result in provocative and dogmatic assertions of absolute socio-cultural difference and (as) diversity.

The state and Leftist government occupies an unenviable position. Given the hegemonic nature of bushmanness as a discursive trope, the powerful and omnipotent imaging of 'bushman' - in which the opinions and sentiments of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen paradoxically become incidental - the state will lay itself open to Right Wing criticism and/or demands if it in any way assists the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen. If, on the other hand, the state does nothing about the predicament of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen it will probably receive stringent criticism from people who view

Bushmen as the revered 'Other', who think of 'bushman' as the sacrosanct bridge between the past and the future.

Bushmanness: (Re)centering Competing Nationalisms?

In his paper on recuperating the San ('bushman') as the idiomatic custodians of 'a new Eden' - the 'New South Africa' - Tomaselli (1993: 83) has a section entitled "The San: Decentering Competing Nationalisms". Tomaselli draws on Masilela's (1987) notion of a baseline monoculture. Masilela (1987: 58) contends that "the base and fundamental layer of our unified and multi-complex culture, is the still unexamined but incomparably rich culture of the Khoisan people", and that, in the 'New South Africa', it is a worth-while cause to revitalise 'bushman' in attempting "to construct a singular and unified structure of our culture" (Masilela, 1987: 58).

For both Masilela (1987) and Tomaselli (1993), Bushmen are seen as the embodiment of "the true components of a part of our national culture" (Masilela, 1987: 58, 59); 'bushman' culture, 'First Culture', is viewed as a means to avoid the potentially divisive and destructive competing nationalisms which threaten reconciliation in a post-apartheid South Africa. On the contrary, and what I have tried to show, is that quite the reverse seems to be occurring, and may continue to occur. Revitalising and recuperating 'bushman', the mobilising of a kinetic political resource, may result in or certainly contribute toward recentering competing nationalisms, particularly Right Wing calls for self-determination.

In pointing out the ideological versatility of 'bushman', the political utility of reappropriating much vaunted nostalgic representations of Bushmen, I have attempted to stress the latent dangers in recuperating 'bushman'. But, I have done so in a manner which does not deny the existence of Bushmen, or proclaim that Bushmen should not exist. I do not eschew 'bushman' per se, nor do I unilaterally dismiss the very real place of bushmanness. What by now should be readily apparent is that Bushmanness and 'bushman' may be imagined, but are by no means imaginary. However, state entrenched, and formal partisan manipulation of bushmanness is something that the 'New South Africa' can ill afford. If people wish to proclaim to be Bushmen, to redeem bushmanness and Otherness, so be it. But there must be a fundamental proviso, namely

that asserting socio-cultural difference must not receive formal, party-political, state, or official political sanction.

Elements of the Right Wing, and parties aligned with the political Left, have made a perfectly rational and strategic decision to embrace the notion that 'bushman' forms a bridge between the past and the future, and they have done so in a way that is no more problematic, no less patronising, than the efforts by authors, intellectuals, producers, and directors to do the same, albeit for ostensibly different reasons. Across the political spectrum, parties and coteries are interested in, and have invoked, *recuperated*, redeemed, the idea of Bushmen as pristine, primitive people with a unique cultural identity that must be protected and preserved into the future. Bushmanness, like *volkstater* Afrikanerness, or more fittingly like Inkatha-style Zuluness, is depicted as a condition of absolute, unequivocal difference that warrants special attention, and the granting of a landed 'safe-haven'. The idea of primordial and quintessential Otherness is understood, from the Right *and* the Left, to have particular resonance in, and for, the future of a 'New South Africa'. There is indeed a fine line between recuperating 'bushman' and recapturing Bushmen.

NOTES

1. The title of this paper is drawn from the stenciled warning that adorns the sides of the military sewerage tankers at Schmidtsdrift. In the same way that these words caution against the contents of the tankers, I caution against the call to 'recuperate the San': to view 'bushman' as a bridge between the past and the future is to potentially enter the realm of 'dangerous diluted sewerage poison'.
2. The terms 'bushman' and San are used interchangeably in tune with the implicit, though ironic, coterminality that Tomaselli (1993) employs. Like Voss (1990) I see little use, let alone epistemological merit, in attempting to tease apart two complex, interrelated, imbricated categories.
3. Since 1992, when the Batlhaping (who were evicted from Schmidtsdrift under apartheid) lodged what has subsequently become a successful claim for the return of Schmidtsdrift, there has been increasing pressure from the Batlhaping to remove the Bushmen from Schmidtsdrift. There has been a pressing need to somehow address the plight of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen in light of the fact that they will lose the land on which they have resided for the last five years. But the land was never officially theirs and it is far from self-evident that the reoccupation of Schmidtsdrift by the Batlhaping need result in the scenario entertained by the Trust and the ANC government, namely the formal resettlement of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen elsewhere.

In other words, it would be dangerously premature to assume that the reason for resettling the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen on their own piece of land is because of the imminent occupation of Schmidtsdrift by another group of people. The resettling of people presently living at Schmidtsdrift need not necessarily imply engaging in the rhetorics of 'bushman'.

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