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The post-apartheid era: the San as bridge between past and future*

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The era of late capitalism, with its emphasis on rationality and technical solutions, has largely separated the analytical ego from its unconscious (irrational) roots. This has occurred with both the personal and (collective) childhood of people living under industrial conditions. Africa is seen to contain one of the last living remnants of earlier times in the form of the San (popularly known as 'Bushmen'). Laurens van der Post's writing and film making, for example, is explicitly geared to a search for the instinctive life of his childhood. The evocative symbol of the San is the means he uses to gaining a deeper understanding of ourselves and of others who live in Africa:

'How lucky I was as a child by being sustained in my instinctive self by the primitive world into which I was born. Dreams to my black and colored countrymen were real, vital and decisive facts, rivalling the reality of any in the objective physical world around them. As a child already they made manifest to me that for them, as Levy-Bruhl was to proclaim later, the dream was the real god of primitive people. My own special Bushman nurse even had a father whose spirit was vivid with manly pride in the name of Dream bestowed on him at birth (van der Post 1988:12).'

South African TV documentaries, magazine inserts and commercials, films, photographic essays, calendars and tourist images on the San have proliferated in recent years. Many appropriations of San rock art, the people and white myths (in the sense of public meanings which serve as a mirror rather than the Jungian concept of myth as 'psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul') about them, have been motivated by cynical commercialism. But some are genuine attempts by white film makers to understand and affirmatively image a culture or cultures called the 'First People' by Van der Post.

Van der Post is primarily seeking the lost childhood of humankind, also possibly atoning for the misdeed of his grandfather who killed the last surviving San rock artist (Van der Post 1986). John Marshall is trying to save

a people doomed by modernity. Jamie Uys was attempting to restore the idea of cultural purity and isolation by mobilizing Western myths about the San as metaphors for Afrikaners, a return to the Afrikaner childhood.

Around the work of Uys and Myburgh an acrimonious debate developed, led by Rob Gordon and Edward Wilmsen (Wilmsen 1991, Gunther 1990, 1991, Myburgh 1990). This controversy followed Wilmsen's strident denunciations of anthropological studies of the San by Robert Lee, John Yellen and others who insist that the San they studied in the 50's had retained their 'forager mentality' and remained exemplars of hunting and gathering cultures. Into this war of images, academic angst and conflict, stumbled Paul Myburgh's film *People of the Great Sandface* (1985). The international anthropological wrath and accusations of racism that had been aimed at Uys's *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films (e.g. Volkmann 1988) now found a new outlet in Myburgh.

The conflicts between anthropologists and film makers form the backdrop to this paper which offers a revisionist analysis in relation to the affirmative imagery of the San found in the above mentioned films. I delve into questions of autobiography and self-identity, and relationships between the personal and the ethnographic. My discussion is framed within a Jungian analysis.

Killer Myths and the Shadow Archetype

Sandface was essentially a Jungian autobiographical exploration, but was mercilessly attacked because of Myburgh's claims of ethnographic accuracy. Uys had similarly claimed that his portrayal of 'Bushmen' in the Gods films was correct. Both films rode to international financial success on the back of the myth of the 'Bushmen' created by anthropologists themselves in the form of the evolutionary concept of the San as a people frozen in time. By the time Gods was released in the US in 1983, this paradigm had been discredited, but the scientifically legitimated myth continued to live on in the popular imagination.

Myburgh's critics have largely emphasized the ethnographic dimension in Sandface. The implication of this argument is that the affirmative dimension that Myburgh incorporates into his narrative has less to do with ethnographic integrity or anthropology than with, as Van der Post puts it in *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, 'a story of a journey in a great wasteland and a search for some pure remnant of the unique and almost vanished First People of my native land, the Bushmen of Africa.' This kind of excavation of an original culture by writers, film and television makers, advertisers, photographers, poets and so on, to facilitate a South African path to a future beyond apartheid, has its roots in Van der Post's writings.

The myth of the First Culture within this discourse differs dramatically with the 'killer-myth' of 'wild Bushmen' as excavated by Gordon in his analyses of how the San have been represented and exploited by white German, British, Dutch and African invaders and colonists during the 18th and 19th Centuries. This is the 'shadow archetype,' or the 'Other' as found in the anthropological literature. The shadow figure represents the observer's 'opposite,' that which stands in contradiction of his or her conscious principles.

The shadow (or dark) archetype is identified by Jung from the 'lost childhood' metaphor. It is an archetypal symbol of all that is primitive, feared and largely denied by industrialized Western (and communist) psyches. This archetype – a pre-existent form – is something that has been recognized and named by academic writing and early documentaries when the San are labelled as 'vermin' and thought to be little more than animals or primitives incapable of transcending their academically or popularly assumed stone-age consciousness. The shadow stands on the threshold of the way to the unconscious, that deep-seated Other residing in everyone. *Sandface* is one attempt by its maker to confront his own shadow.

The San: Decentering Competing Nationalisms

At the political level, revitalizations of the San as the First People/Culture are intended as a caution to the strategies of the African National (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congresses (PAC). The ANC's idea of a 'national culture' emerged in resistance discourses as a way to re-suture the racial, ethnic and economic fracturing engineered by apartheid. Embedded in this concept of 'national culture,' however, are incipient and potentially divisive black and African nationalisms opposed by an increasingly strident white Afrikaner nationalism.

Ntongela Masilela has tried to recuperate the idea of the 'First People' from Van der Post's writings as a way of identifying a common cultural heritage which predated all later immigrants to South Africa (Masilela 1987:60). Masilela is trying to get all South Africans to see and confront their own shadows (nationalisms) inherited from the past, which may yet destroy our future. He argues that we can only overcome these by stripping ourselves of our personas or masks, taking up the challenge of confrontation with our inherited shadows. One way of exposing the shadow is by meeting oneself through the 'realm of the sympathetic system' that is the First unifying culture (of our collective childhood)(Jung 1968:21). This imperative is itself tied to questions of nationalism (shadows)- white, black, African, Afrikaner – and so on, which

continue to create conflicting ideological divisions within the current period of reconstruction, and which themselves marginalize other minority groupings such as 'colored' and 'Indian.'

To give meaning to life we need to recover in a new synthesis, the instructional and intuitive nature that still exists, ignored and denied, within the depths of human nature, argues Jung.

Masilela's quest, which implies the impossibility of cutting ourselves loose from our archetypal cultural foundations, identifies a 'new' moment of consciousness. This is found in the need to provide a new interpretation to connect the past, still residing within us, to the present, which threatens to slip away from it. As Jung explains, if 'this link-up does not take place, a kind of rootless consciousness comes into being no longer orientated to the past' (Jung 1968:157). The loss of the past may result in psychic epidemics (apartheid?), symptoms of a refusal to confront ourselves. Reference to the psychic and historical past, however, helps to overcome these kinds of problems.

Recourse to attributes of the First People as Van der Post, Myburgh, Masilela and others have done – if even only discursively mythical – may offer one tactical route towards a cultural synthesis and an empathy for Africa. As Masilela states, these writers' (including Olive Schreiner and Roy Campbell):

sense of history informed them that only by beginning with the First People (the Khoisan people), and by placing them at the center of their enterprise can a historically authentic structure of South African cultural history be constructed. Indeed, the base and fundamental layer, of our unified and multi-complex culture, is the still unexamined but incomparably rich culture of the Khoisan people (Masilela 1987:58).

Where Masilela's excavation is an historical materialist one, Van der Post and Myburgh's are of a Jungian nature. Whichever paradigm is being proceeded from, the affirmative TV renditions may well offer a means to avoid the destructive competing nationalisms which threaten to sink the emergence of a non-racial South Africa.

The San figure as symbolic of the 'child within' that has long since been smothered beneath the structures and trappings of late capitalism is both our own 'shadow' and the 'dark brother' who stands in the entrance to our hidden inner world and lost innocence. Although impossible to return to prehistory, Jung argues the possibility of recovering, in new forms, the timeless inheritance of the fundamental human psyche as a self-regulating organism in harmony with the inner world, as well as with the external environment. It seems that this may have been Myburgh's task in *Sandface*: to achieve individually (himself) and collectively (the Gwike band he reconstituted) the restoration of a natural balance between rational and intuitive modes of experience.

Sandface, however, is accused by Gordon and others of being 'A Great White Lie.' This it may be on the surface in terms of ethnographic veracity. But at subterranean levels of the collective unconscious, the film could be a courageous, though often naive attempt to find the key to self-identity in relation to a forgotten universal cultural/religious synthesis. The framework developed by Masilela from Van der Post leads him to conclude that *Sandface* is a 'reconstruction of a culture in crisis' – not the San's, but Myburgh's own.

The metaphorical excavation by film makers should be seen against the struggle by white South Africans to come to terms with their cultural homelessness, as well as Africanity, the past, the present and the future. Such films position themselves as 'uniting symbols' which: 'throw a bridge between present-day consciousness, always in danger of losing its roots, and the natural, unconscious, instinctive wholeness of primeval times. Through this mediation the uniqueness, peculiarity, and one-sidedness of our present individual consciousness are linked up again with its natural, racial roots (Jung 1968:174).'

Directors act as mediators between the present, the past and the future. In Jungian terms, these directors are trying to penetrate through their 'personal unconscious' by bringing to the surface deep, lost and painful repressed memories of the past residing in the 'collective unconscious.'

Metaphor of the 'Journey'

Van der Post entered the First People by leaving the 20th Century to re-emerge into the past through his Kalahari expeditions, Uys's portrayal is located within 'the fundamental layer of our contemporary culture.' He is trying to bring to consciousness a culture and philosophy of an Afrikaner childhood. Eliciting this kind of 'primordial type' through the use of film can perhaps oralize or visualize archetypal ideas in a general and secondary form.

If the conscious mind is split from its origins, life, says Jung, loses meaning, becomes incapable of realizing the synthesis of the new state, and relapses into a far worse situation than before (Jung 1968:174-5).

The recurring metaphor of a 'journey,' of a 'journeying people,' is a myth which works at two levels: on the one hand the San are imaged as nomads. But from the perspective of those who write and film them, the journey is really an introspective one. It is an exploration into archetypes embedded somewhere in the unconscious psyche of whites who now feel an innate need to unlock manifestations of these archetypal ideas and images by mobilizing certain sets of symbols to find a route to reconciliation. Where the sign is knowable (and

semiotic) and less than the content it represents, the symbol in Jung's sense implies something more than its immediate or conventional meaning, lying beyond the grasp of direct apprehension.

Symbols such as those used by visual artists of the San are known objects that 'stand for' relatively unknown or ultimately unknowable entities. The archetype as inferred through signs, however, 'expresses itself first and foremost in metaphors (Jung 1968:157)' as with the concept of 'journey.'

Archetypal ideas such as those South African whites are now recalling about the Sanare, in Jung's terms, part of the universal collective unconscious, irrepresentable, pre-existent forms that are part of an inherited structure of the human psyche. The substitution of the Van der Post kind of motif (or 'complexes' of the personal unconscious) found in TV, cinema, advertising, literature and so on, for the early white and black or collective unconscious's archetypal image of the San as 'vermin' (the shadow image), can manifest itself spontaneously anywhere at any time (Jung 1974:449). What accounts for the shift in this shadow archetype from San as vermin to them as the First People?

It was during the 1980s that the negative shadow-like representations of the San as wild and thieving savages were replaced by the positive imagery of the San as unthreatening, as an instinctual sign-vehicle of our inner selves. Now that the San are on the 'edge of extinction' the desire to conserve them as one would an endangered species arose within the dominant apartheid hegemony. The international success of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* rekindled this idea within South Africa's occupying Administration in South West Africa. As Jung would perhaps argue, the San in such 'positive' representations, are both the 'white man's' 'shadow' and his 'dark brother' who stands in the entrance to the collective inner world. Where the early European explorers and colonizers perceived of indigenous peoples in a 'dark' symbolic way, the new commentators welcome them as the innocent, unclothed 'First People' of a new Eden. The negative shadow archetype of the San has been replaced by a positive one, that of the 'First People'.

Archetypal imagery is symbolic says Jung, because it connects the individual with a living, although relatively unknown realm – in this case the realm and tracings left by the First People on contemporary South African psyches and cultures (contemporary art, musical tonalities of language which are still found in Xhosa, cosmology and other cultural categories). The archetype of a First People is a post-Darwinian one which incorporates associations of the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam before the Fall, living in a child-like innocence with God and all Creation.

The metaphor of the journey is an attempt to reach into the unknown – both past and future. But it is a journey that may be impossible. A Jung

argues, the ultimate nature of the psyche, for which the archaeologist was searching, is unknowable. However, such images also conceal their own shadows (or the shadow of the whites who made it). Imaging the San in an ahistorical synchronic moment refuses the history of dispossession and extermination. As one side of the shadow emerges into the ideological light, so the other remains repressed deep within the collective unconscious of white South Africans. At the very moment they grasp for the cleansing archetype of the First People they simultaneously deny it, failing yet again to confront the 'Other' within.

Conclusion: Recovering Jung

Critical anthropologists have concentrated on the literal, the visibly ethnographic, when analyzing films, but have often missed the deeper 'personal' and 'collective' meanings or archetypal ideas residing in the texts of media which call for different kinds of analysis.

As an unending web of archetypal patterns, collective cultural images of the San reflected on by Van der Post, Myburgh, etc, link the positive archetypal expressions on the San back to Van der Post's conception of the First People. This search for origins is: 'an effort to deal with the relationship of the individual to the world, to people and things (Jung 1963:207).' This certainly comes through the writings of Van der Post and the interview with Myburgh. In the process of making films the hidden archetypes are altered through being made visible, and re-interpreted in terms of the film maker's consciousness. This might explain the differences that exist between the expressions I have discussed while also accounting for the film makers' respective quests for the 'spirit' and 'soul' of the San. In the process of this journey, these film makers are attempting to examine their own consciousness. As Jung puts it, 'We can just feel our way into [the image handed down by tradition], but the original experience has been lost (Jung 1968:7).' As autobiography, their respective journeys can penetrate the personal unconscious. Through 'active imagination (Jung 1968:49), the film makers discussed have produced sequences of images which have resulted in material rich in archetypal images and associations, but which cannot expose the patterns of mental and emotional behavior which are common to both the observing and the observed and re-created cultures: both have disintegrated, the former through the emergence of post-modernist processes, the latter through genocide and modernism.

In conclusion, then, we need to make a distinction between a visual anthropology or filmmaking which is ethnographic in nature, and film making

which is essentially a psychic search for origins. The former aims to be scientifically accurate within the postulates of anthropology, whether materialist or otherwise. The latter is essentially autobiographical. As autobiography, films and advertisements are useful ethnographic documents. But they are not ethnography, and to critique them as such is misleading. But for their makers to claim an ethnographic imperative is equally false.

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