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(Staging ethnicity:
lessons from Namaqualand)

Track Two

Constructive Approaches to Community and Political Conflict

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Beyond 'Baasskap'

Can Afrikaner ethnicity be reconciled with black majority rule?

The highly contentious issue of ethnicity — the mainspring of apartheid — remains an important concept for certain South African groups. In 1991/2 the Afrikaner Vryheidstgting (AVSTIG), proponents of the best-known proposal for an Afrikaner homeland, met the African National Congress (ANC) to put their case. While not won over, the ANC conceded that ethnicity might be acceptable once rid of its overtones of 'baasskap', or (white) racial domination. AVSTIG's own policies have developed significantly in the past eighteen months. Hendrik W van der Merwe, facilitator of the AVSTIG-ANC meetings, reports on their dialogue, followed by comments from the participants themselves.

Discussions about ethnicity in South Africa today must be seen in the context of the disastrous exploitation of ethnicity by the apartheid government to oppress and divide black people. To the extent that Afrikaner ethnicity was ideologically linked to white 'baasskap' and racism, its perpetuation in the form of an autonomous homeland for Afrikaners would seem in direct conflict with the democratic, non-racial ideals of the new South Africa.

Key concepts in traditional Afrikaner thought such as self-determination and group identity have now been repudiated in many Afrikaner circles. However, a number of Afrikaners have come to believe that only an independent homeland will ensure their survival as a distinct group, preserving their language, religion and culture. These homelands or 'volksstaats' view themselves as ethnic or Boere-Afrikaners, unlike those 'alternative' Afrikaners who are willing to be absorbed into a new dispensation.

...continued on p. 4



PAUL WEINBERG / SOUTHLIGHT

Wounded but not defeated —
reads the monument in this re-enactment of the Groot Trek. For many Afrikaners a volksstaat means cultural, if not physical, survival.

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Staging Ethnicity:

Lessons from Namaqualand

*For present-day descendants of the pre-colonial Nama pastoralists of the north-west Cape, ethnic identity is performance, argue University of Cape Town anthropologists **John Sharp** and **Emile Boonzaier**. Emerging in mid-1991 around the establishment of the Richtersveld National Park, Nama ethnic identity is role-play, formulated collectively through dialogue and modified according to context. This contrasts sharply with Zulu identity as portrayed by Inkatha...*

One might well ask why Nama ethnicity has only recently become an issue to the people of the north-west Cape. The Nama of Namaqualand are, after all, no more Nama today than they have been before. Yet it was only with the struggle over the establishment of a national park on land in the Northern Richtersveld reserve that the first signs of a positive formulation of Nama identity arose.

The signing ceremony to mark the park's establishment, held in the small town of Kuboes in June 1991, was an explicit manifestation of this emerging ethnicity. During the ceremony outsiders who had been invited to the event were confronted with a

range of clear symbols of Nama ethnic identity — the presence of a Nama choir, the singing of Nama songs, the construction of a traditional Nama matjieshuis, and the staging of the marriage ritual for a Nama bride. These symbols were intended to express continuity with the traditional past — with the pre-colonial Khoikhoi inhabitants of

the region. They gave, as the people of the reserve implied, a glimpse of their heritage, an indication of who they were, and an insight into the burden of responsibility they believe they bear as intermediaries between past and future generations.

The signing of the contract for the park had been preceded by long and difficult negotiations with the National Parks Board, during which the people had managed to win significant concessions. Had the

park been established as the Parks Board initially envisaged, the people of the reserve would have been forced to give up a large tract of grazing land, and to accept a smaller and inferior area in compensation.

But the people took the state to court, and won an order requiring the state and the Parks Board to renegotiate the deal with them. In the course of the negotiations, the Parks Board conceded that the people had a right to their land that should not be violated, and that any reasonable proposal for a nature park would have to allow them to continue to use the land within the park, pay them a suitable rent, and involve them as co-managers of the project.

The people of the reserve thus hosted an elaborate ceremony to mark the occasion, and they issued invitations to a range of interested parties. They had several purposes in staging this ceremony. They wanted to celebrate a considerable success, to show that a small number of people with sufficient resolve could take on the state and win. They wanted to demonstrate emphatically that their success was righteous, that they did indeed have an inalienable right to the land in question. And they wanted to reaffirm their unity in the aftermath of debate and compromise that had led to dissension within their own ranks.

Given the public context, there could have been no better medium through which to express their collective resolve, right, and unity than that of their ethnic identity. The ceremony was therefore designed, in part, to highlight their Nama identity. The Nama were, of course, the pre-colonial inhabitants of the region that became the north-west Cape, semi-nomadic Khoikhoi pastoralists who



By emphasising their Nama identity at a public ceremony, the people of the Northern Richtersveld reserve stressed their conviction that there was continuity between themselves and the 'first owners' of the land.

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PAUL GRENDON / SOUTHLIGHT

Among the Nama of the north-west Cape, the matjieshuis is like an heirloom: an emblem of heritage, valued for its 'Namaness', but not part of 'lived culture'

roamed the landscape before the Dutch, and then the British, asserted sovereignty over the area.

By emphasising their Nama identity at a public ceremony, the people of the Northern Richtersveld reserve stressed their conviction that there was continuity between themselves and the 'first owners' of the land. This continuity was taken to establish their legitimate right to the land, and to constitute the source of their unity and resolve.

The performance of continuity

But there is a paradox underlying this assertion of continuity with the past. It is, fundamentally, a new assertion, which has emerged in response to the recent struggles over land in the Richtersveld. For years the people of this reserve have gone out of their way to avoid the opprobrium which others have attached to the label 'Nama' (and its derogatory version 'Hotnot'). In the colonial era, and the post-colonial period to date, those who have held power in the north-west Cape — state officials, missionaries, mine- and land-owners — have reviled the notion of Namaness. To them, people who were Nama were primitive and inferior, and they used their power to construct a social world in which these meanings were given reality: those identified as Nama were assigned the lowest places in the social hierarchy.

The Nama were induced to participate in this process of denigrating 'indigenoussness'. From the 19th century onwards, the people themselves suppressed the Nama language in favour of the region's lingua franca (Afrikaans), relinquished distinctive Nama customs and generally sought to win acceptance as members of the larger category of 'coloured' people.

It is certainly no accident that this new notion of

being Nama should have emerged at a moment of heightened self-confidence resulting from collective success. There was also the fact that in the course of their land struggle the people of the reserve made contact with native people in other post-colonial states (Australia and Canada), and learned much from the latter's efforts to rescue their own identities from the condescension of the settler societies. Aborigines, Indians and Inuit have had similar experiences of domination and ridicule, to which they too have responded in the past few decades with new assertions of ethnic identity.

To comprehend these episodes of 'new ethnogenesis', it is critically important to distinguish what native people **are** saying

about their ethnic identities from what they are **not** saying. The people of Northern Richtersveld are not saying that the symbols of Nama ethnicity with which they conjure reflect their current style of life. For instance, they have no deep desire to dwell in matjieshuise, which, in the context of everyday life, they associate with poverty and the inability to afford modern housing. To them the matjieshuis and similar cultural artefacts are like heirlooms: tokens of identity highly valued in certain contexts, but not seen to form part of lived culture.

The people are, therefore, not saying that they currently possess a unique Nama culture which sets them fundamentally apart from others in the region and in South Africa. The claim to Nama identity is not an attempt to draw an unambiguous boundary

The people are not saying that the symbols of Nama ethnicity with which they conjure reflect their current style of life.

“The formulation of Nama identity is a dialogic process, both within the Northern Richtersveld reserve and across its borders.”

between themselves and others. It would thus be totally wrong to conclude that they are asserting a form of apartheid 'from below'. This was abundantly clear in the ceremony, where the people were acutely aware that they were addressing a variety of audiences.

Firstly, their guests included state officials, and local people took the opportunity of sending a powerful message to them about the source of their rights to land. Secondly, there were representatives from the media, the Parks Board, and the scientific community who were interested in the issue of 'cultural survival'. To them, the park would provide sanctuary not only for endangered flora and fauna, but also for a 'traditional' culture taken to 'belong' to the people of the reserve. While the people clearly do not believe that their culture — in the sense of their lived culture — is in any danger of extinction, they were prepared to indulge this audience, partly out of politeness and partly because they saw the economic possibilities of marketing 'traditional culture' to eco-tourists in the national park.

Thirdly, the audience included people from other Namaqualand reserves and from the ranks of the democratic movement in South Africa. The Northern Richtersveld people went to great lengths to include these guests as active participants in the occasion, and thereby to qualify any implication that the ceremony was aimed primarily at differentiating outsiders from insiders. This made considerable political sense. In the past the people of the Northern Richtersveld have been tagged, unflatteringly, as 'real Hottentots' by the inhabitants of other local reserves, who have downplayed their own undeniable links with the first inhabitants of the area. Given an occasion on which to dwell publicly on the positive aspects of the Nama connection, the people of the Northern Richtersveld sought to build bridges, and to share this identity with others.

This was not opportunism: their behaviour in this instance was of a piece with a growing realisation that they, as Nama,

are also part of the working class and the politically oppressed in South Africa. Those amongst them employed in the diamond and copper mines of the region have recently joined the National Union of Mineworkers. The revaluation of their Nama identity has been of fundamental significance in their decision to join the union, in that it has given them a sense of dignity and self-worth which has been extended to the workplace.

Thus the signing ceremony was certainly an assertion of Nama identity, but it was also a sensitive



statement about the ambiguity and flexibility of social boundaries in present-day Namaqualand and South Africa.

The wider context

The people of the reserve displayed great dexterity in communicating a complex message regarding their ethnic identity to a diverse audience. This seems a far cry from the single-minded assertion of exclusive ethnic identity associated with movements such as Inkatha. One could argue that the difference is simply a question of numbers — the Zulu are many, the Nama few. This may be a contributory factor, but it is not decisive: it is not as if all Zulu respond in the same way to Inkatha's message of ethnic mobilisation.

Another factor is that the Nama are not engaged in competition with any party other than the state. They do not claim land that belongs to anybody else: they seek only to have the state recognise their continuing right to land which has, in the past, been allocated to them. This is important, but one cannot assume that all Zulu see themselves as being in direct competition with members of other ethnic groups.

Probably most significant is that statements of Nama identity are being formulated collectively. There is no single leader, no leadership clique that has the power to create and enforce a vision of what it should mean to be Nama. Nama identity is negotiated by a group of people who are not homogeneous — some are farmers, others workers; some are poor, others relatively well-off; some are politically conservative, others more radical. No subdivision of this group dominates any other, and Nama identity must be formulated, and qualified, in a way acceptable to all. The formulation of this identity is a dialogic process, both within the Northern Richtersveld reserve and across its borders.

Inkatha's version of Zulu ethnic identity is not the outcome of a similar dialogue. Even though it elicits favourable response from a proportion of the Zulu population, it remains an imposition. This is because Buthelezi has the power to declaim a vision of what it means to be Zulu. He derives this power from two sources. One lies in his command of the structures of a bantustan state. The other is that his interpretation of Zuluness is validated, and reinforced, by influential outsiders. Inkatha's fiction of Zuluness, involving militarism and pride as central themes, accords perfectly with the place that 'the Zulu' have been given in Western conceptions of 'The Other'. Inkatha may have difficulty selling its message in its self-proclaimed con-

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situency, but it has a ready audience in Pretoria, London and Washington.

One can contrast this with the Nama, who have to negotiate the burden of long-standing prejudice from outsiders, on the one hand, and the recent, and more fickle, adulation of cultural survivalists on the other. As a result, the people of the Northern Richtersveld are aware that any assertion of traditional Nama identity is performance. It is role-playing, in many ways like acting on a stage. Without the threat of authoritarian compulsion to conform, people can decide when they wish to be on stage and also off stage — when to display Nama tradition and when to resume a contemporary life in which a specifically Nama identity plays a minor role.

Inkatha's power to pronounce a specific Zulu identity does not extend to an ability to enforce universal conformity. But it does provoke conflict

around the issue of ethnic identity. It is this conflict itself — the unchecked violence in Natal and the Witwatersrand — that causes many Zulu people to fall in line with Inkatha's conception of Zuluness. In this situation it is not so much ethnicity that produces conflict, but conflict that produces ethnicity. When bullets fly, no one can go off stage, or qualify the way their identity is portrayed.

The Nama make it clear that their ethnic identity is performance. Were it not for Inkatha, many Zulu people would do the same. The fact that ethnic identity is performance does not make it a dangerous fake. Danger erupts, on the contrary, only when people are induced to forget this simple fact.

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"...It is not so much ethnicity that produces conflict, but conflict that produces ethnicity."

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