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Debating the Role of Museums in Khoisan Identity and Heritage

Gabeba Abrahams-Willis

South African Cultural History Museum Cape Town

If museums are to fulfil their 21st century goal of more effective communication, then museums in this country will have to change drastically in order to address the multicultural nature of their audience. The process of interaction and communication is crucial to this discussion. Much of this cuts across the traditional lines of scholarly disciplines. The legacy of ethnic dominance and social and class structures which also underpinned the apartheid regime still lies behind many of the destructive and unproductive tensions in South African society today. Museums require a radical new approach to fulfil their promising new role.

The way in which the Khoisan have been represented or the lack of their representation in museums, has been a bone of contention which has brought disgrace to the discipline for far too long. Partnerships in museum activities are about sharing, breaking down barriers, treading with extreme sensitivity and creating the grounds for a harmonious future together. One of the underlying issues is about the ownership of identity: Who owns the Khoisan identity? Who manages it? Who interprets it?

Something Personal of Identity, Heritage and Sentiment

I would like to begin with a personal story of when I started working at the South African Museum. In those days, in the early 1980s, there were no people of colour at the Museum in the capacity of Professional Officer. One of the means of motivating for my appointment was that I was classified in the Apartheid days as a so-called "Cape Malay". During my time of "probation" at the Museum, I was called in by the Assistant Director and confronted with one of the doyens of the so-called "Cape Malay Culture", the late Dr. I. D. du Plessis. Dr. du Plessis was a gentleman of repute and I was introduced as the person with a difference in opinion about the so-called "Cape Malays".

This was seventeen years ago and I was a fairly young person entering the Museum discipline and the idea was to put me in charge of the museum in the Malay Quarter called the Bo-Kaap Museum, which was initiated by Dr. Du Plessis. Dr. Du Plessis was also on the Board of Directors of the Museum, who would ultimately approve my job or not. I therefore found myself in a serious predicament. Do I allow Dr Du Plessis to impose his judgements of my identity on me or do I confront him with what I believe to be my own identity? My gut reaction took over, regardless of the consequences. Before I knew it, I was saying:

"Dr. Du Plessis, with all due respect for your years of research and numerous publications on the topic, I beg to differ. Why do you call me a Cape Malay, when all I am is a South African? You're a South African, aren't you? Nobody calls you a German just because you may have some German ancestry way back in time, do they?"

We parted amicably, and I have been told that Dr. Du Plessis supported the approval of my job. He was a fine gentleman and I visited him on his death bed in hospital. Many years later, however, I still think about this incident. Having thought about it again recently, this experience taught me two very important lessons about identity: firstly, not to impose identities on people and, secondly, to lay claim to your own identity and to take ownership of it.

Personally, its been very difficult for me to be objective and to break away from the subjectivity of a topic which is of such an internalised, sentimental nature. People can sometimes take on different or multiple identities under differing circumstances. These are perhaps the "multi-layered webs of significance" referred to by Louise de la Gorgendiere (1996:12). In this forum I am an archaeologist, to my colleagues a fellow museum worker, but my identity is also that of a Muslim woman, a daughter, a mother, a wife, a Capetonian, and so on.

In a more academic sense, the question is, how do we exist with our own identities and perform our objective functions in museum cultural contexts? How do we keep these worlds apart or integrate them in a sensible, rational and non-patronising, non-discriminatory way? How do we allow for the freedom of expression, respect and sensitivity towards other cultures, those which are not the museum workers' or the researchers' cultures?

At a recent conference I attended, the Executive Director of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Mr Dawson Munjeri, said something about heritage which lingers on in my mind. In his search for the definition of heritage, he found the concept extremely illusive and claimed that "we *toi toi* with such terms as heritage resources, heritage management but...we seldom say and mean the same thing..." (Munjeri 1997).

In his experience, Dawson Munjeri found that it spoke volumes about power and politics and less about heritage. Accords have been made, codes of ethics have been drawn up and policy guidelines have been prepared (SAMA Workshop on Sensitive Collections 1996; Vermillion Accord 1989; World Archaeological Congress Code of Ethics 1990; The Museum Ethnographers Group Guidelines). But, for example, the return of

the remains of Saartjie Baartman remains a burning and unresolved issue (Cape Times 1996, February; Mail & Guardian 1995, June; 1996, May). Saartjie Baartman was a Quena woman from the Eastern Cape who died in 1815 after six years of humiliation and exploitation in freak shows in which she was made to parade naked. Although it has been argued that Saartjie Baartman only represents the "remote colonial past" to the museum in Paris where her remains are stored, but to indigenous people in southern Africa, it is as though it only happened the other day, and it still hurts. Heritage and identity are highly emotional and sensitive issues.

The Question of Ethnic Identity – A Thorny Issue

In 1994 I delivered a paper at a Conference on the Island of Reunion (Abrahams-Willis 1995). The paper was entitled "Ethnic identity: culture prickly pear in South African museums?". In this paper, I raised a few questions which are also implicit in the discussions at this Conference and were centred around the following issues:

- 1) The problem of subjective interpretations.
- 2) The danger of political conflict, disputes and wars associated with ethnic divides.
- 3) The concept of "nation building" in South Africa.
- 4) The use of group identity as a tool for social action.
- 5) Reinterpretation of a people's history.
- 6) And ultimately, the question of democratisation in museums, how South African museums will overcome an infamous legacy as "Eurocentric", "bastions of ideology", "patronising and paternalistic", "exclusive", "elitist", "Institutions which alienate Black South Africans and reinforce separatism".

For the purpose of discussion here, I would like to focus on the case of museums and their role in Khoisan identity and heritage. In the aforementioned paper, I advocated that the process of democratisation in museums demands, among other things, informed access by all citizens, participatory involvement, mobilising and enfranchising communities to have access to resources and decision-making. These are issues which need to be debated and negotiated and become part of the museum's *modus operandi*. That is what I would recommend to this Conference.

Last year I put forward a proposal to the South African Cultural History Museum with regard to Khoisan involvement in museum exhibitions. Participatory involvement has, for such a long time been bandied about, but the essence of good partnerships and communication surely is about bringing communities into projects right at the outset. Outreach programmes must be aimed at developing a guide of good practice, worked out in conjunction with communities. The issue of exhibitions on indigenous cultures must be "addressed" not "redressed", through a new approach. Communication with groups of Khoisan descendants must focus on articulating common agendas, new lists of research priorities and collaborative research. These must aim at restoring the self-esteem, the pride and dignity of aboriginal people who, in the past, have been relegated to the dregs of our society. This is why this Conference is so important. Museums must create platforms for dialogue, the space to renegotiate the terms of exhibitions, build community partnerships, empower communities to participate in the exhibition of their history and encourage sensitive inter-cultural co-operation. This is crucial for the cultural development and well-being of our nation as a whole.

Having said this, even in societies which have been starkly divided, especially as in our own, through entrenched policies of segregation at the root of the Apartheid regime, there are few elements in our culture as South Africans which belong exclusively to one ethnic group (Abrahams-Willis 1994:77; Bruce & Saks 1992: Odendaal 1994; Webb 1994:20). Museums also have an obligation to bring together various cultures, to demonstrate elements of culture which are shared and to show what it is that unites our society. Museums in other countries have launched programmes in which children of various backgrounds have been brought together and provided with the opportunity to learn about cross-cultural understanding (Buckley 1994:35). In Southern Africa, wherever we are, in museums or not, we all have an enormous task, starting with our children, to overcome the psychological, social and economic barriers which were master-minded and entrenched by segregation. This, in itself, is the greatest work ahead of us.

There are many opportunities for museums and heritage organisations to initiate cultural activities which are pivotal to social change (Fleming 1997) and to promote equal opportunities, to celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity, to provide choice and access and to help bring about social cohesion. In recognising the social value of museums, we, as museum workers, have to do our bit.

The notion of nation-building in South Africa is about an over-arching cultural group with a single common loyalty, a national identity which encompasses or supersedes other social identities at the political level (Mare 1996:307; Schuyler 1976). In the context of Khoisan identity and heritage, the politics of diversity rests on democratic tolerance, on creating "institutions that will encourage a meeting of minds" (Giddens 1992:208).

Let Us Learn From Our Mistakes

The way in which the Khoisan have been represented or the lack of their representation in museums, has been a bone of contention which has brought disgrace to museums for much too long (Mail & Guardian 1996, April). Its easy to criticise the failings of Khoisan exhibitions in the past, but in a more positive spirit, let us learn from our mistakes.

We all know about the myth that museums are assumed to always "tell the whole truth" and it has been suggested that exhibition organisers should be clearly identified as authors with their biases, to observe that there is always a "curatorial voice" behind the exhibition (Davies 1994:7). There are also many myths involved in the process of consultation. At a workshop I attended last year (South African Museums Association 1996) facilitated by Dr. Amareswar Galla, he pointed out the myth that everything is presumed to be consultable. The exhibition "Miscast" which was held at the SA National Gallery last year, created a hotbed of controversy. One relevant statement made by the artist, Pippa Skotnes, in retrospect, was that she now realises that "you can consult on ideas but you cannot consult on how someone will feel" (Sunday Times 1996, May). My personal feelings about the exhibition, when I was forced to walk all over the Khoisan peoples who were lying at my feet in printed linoleum blocks, was outrage. Why was I not allowed the option not to trample all over these people? I wished for some blank blocks to walk across to the other side of the room. If we are to learn from our mistakes, the visitor must be allowed to view the options, the choices involved in avoiding the human atrocities which often accompany the themes we portray in our exhibitions.

The issue of consultation is often fraught with problems, especially if the process is used as a means of legitimising and creating credibility and if the methods are not appropriate or culturally sensitive. The question is: do museum workers have the appropriate skills and time to implement a thorough process of consultation? In an article entitled "Voices of History" about Brooklyn's Latinos (Snyder-Genier and Caldwell 1992:56), the chief curator emphasized that without any Latino senior staff, it was imperative to draw on outside expertise, to hire people to assist with research, interviews and collecting artefacts and to establish a Community Advisory Committee who were indispensable to the project. The record success of this exhibition provides yet another case study in community involvement, in a grassroots-approach which is the only way forward for heritage.

The issue is about who steers the ship of heritage, and whether the process is inclusive or exclusive? The UNESCO world heritage strategy is pertinent here, in which it is clearly stated that success will only be achieved if heritage is integrated into the lives of the community (UNESCO 1995). The lesson here is that museums must reflect the needs of the people they are designed to serve.

According to John Markakis (1996:299–305), when looking at contemporary Africa, conflict often appears to take on ethnic forms, but the substance is more often than not competition for scarce material and social resources rather than a simple clash of cultures. At present ethnicity's most conspicuous role in Africa is political and in the political arena it is often derogatively labelled as "tribalism" and as "primordial" by intellectuals. Despite this, ethnicity in Africa has not only survived but grows stronger.

There have been a spate of local public forums recently to discuss Khoisan issues and the results have been variable (Blundell 1997:31; Deacon 1997:37). In this United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples, I believe that the Khoisan descendants should speak for themselves.

The Museum as Temple or the Museum as Forum?

Ethnic boundaries are dynamic entities, continually being redefined, expressed and validated by the members within the group (De la Gorgendiere 1996: 3). Some say museums are like temples displaying the icons of dominant groups in our society to be revered (Buckley 1994:35). Others say curators should stand aside and let the museum-as-temple be replaced by the museum-as-forum. In the debate about Khoisan heritage and identity, the role of museums, there are no easy answers. Its a long and precarious journey ahead, one in which we all have to learn to work together, treading with extreme sensitivity and creating the grounds for a harmonious future together. In museums we need to champion the rights of those who have been left out, down-trodden, to strengthen our commitment to oppose institutions which are not inclusive. This requires devotion, courage and intellectual bravery. We need more people, new approaches, creative partnerships, flexibility, openness, honesty and empathy, to respect each other's dignity and worth.

I remember a very simple, but deeply touching statement made by Judge Albie Sachs about heritage and the rights of people in the new South Africa:

"The Constitution speaks ... equally to those whose heritage is that of disinheritance, whose heritage is that of having grown up excluded in the country, whose heritage has been that of dispossession... Everybody counts, everybody has dignity, and the memories of all are equally important" (Sachs 1997).

In conclusion, looking ahead, I have faith in the future of museums in this country. Museums to serve the people of our country. However, the burden of proof is on museums to show that they are worthy of support. Such worthiness depends on good deeds.

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'When I say Land I Talk about my Mother': Contemporary Perspectives on Indigenous Organisations and Encounters in Southern Africa

Sidsel Saugestad

University of Tromsø, Norway

The paper will present an outline and appraisal of the different organisations representing Bushmen that have appeared in Southern Africa recently. The discussion will combine perspectives on cultural identity and on legal frameworks. Firstly, what is often called "the claim to indigeness" will be analysed in view of recent international developments in codifying indigenous peoples (ILO Convention 169 and the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples), as will the special problems and challenges in applying this concept to an African context. Secondly, the aspirations and achievements of organisations will be discussed in a perspective on identity formation and negotiation, minority-majority discourses, and the policy and practice of the hegemonic state. While keeping an overall regional perspective on South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, my main examples and analysis will be based on material on the Botswana context.

"When I say land I talk about my mother":

Aron Johannes at the NGO Forum of the UN Global Summit, Copenhagen, March 1995, translated by John Hardbatt.

In an answer to a question posed in March 1993 on the government's plan for the UN year of the Indigenous Peoples, the Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing of Botswana stated that:

"The Government has not planned any programmes or activities ... This is because, as far as we are concerned, all Botswana are indigenous to the country, except those who may have acquired citizenship by registration. In addition, Government's development programmes and assistance schemes do not draw any distinction among the country's citizens" (Parliamentary records, and *Daily News* 05.03.93).

There is little doubt that the Bushmen, San, Basarwa or Kwe are an indigenous people, according to any reasonable interpretation of the criteria of first arrival, cultural difference and non-dominance. They are also, and increasingly vocally, indigenous by self-description.¹

Responding to the Minister's statement, I wrote an article arguing that the Government of Botswana was not comfortable with the concept "indigenous", or maybe not fully conversant with the term, as used in international jurisprudence (Saugestad 1993a). I still hold this view. But I am more open than I was four years ago to recognise the complexity of the concept in an African context.

Southern Africa is probably one of the most difficult regions in the world in which to use this concept - for obvious reasons. This goes for all of southern Africa, but "being indigenous" has different implications in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. However, if our debate on Khoisan identities and cultural heritage is to contribute to an agenda for a better future, their status as indigenous must be addressed. The objective of this paper is to introduce the concept and to discuss its relevance in a southern African context. I will emphasise that the word "indigenous" has two meanings, the one being more or less synonymous with "local" or "native", the other denoting a *relationship* of a special kind between a minority group and the state in which it resides. The concept "indigenous" used in this second sense, thus focuses more on structural features within a nation state than on the *description* of any given number of features of a group.

Conceptualising the "Indigenous"

One of the paradoxes of the modern world is that at the same time as the struggle against apartheid and racial discrimination - at least in their legal manifestations - is beginning to achieve some success, the need for affirmative action towards groups in disadvantaged situations (and indigenous peoples being prominent among them) is becoming more visible. This need is increasingly recognized internationally. The driving forces here are vocal indigenous organisations, their international networks, and encounters in international forums (UN, ILO).

¹ A note on terminology: All reputable works on the Bushmen include a discussion of which term is the most appropriate to use (Bushman, Khoisan, San, Basarwa), but so far this debate has tried to decide which term has the least derogatory connotations according to their etymological and historical origin. My position is that any term used to express negative attitudes to a group will take on a negative connotation. In this respect, none of the terms is better or worse than the other, and I use them all. No single term of self-reference exists, but the Naro (Central Khoisan) word 'Kwe' or 'Khwe', 'Khoe' (person) is presently a very strong candidate for becoming such a unifying term. In the meantime, linguists are irrelevant, but the debate will need to run its course before a consensus can be reached. In the meantime, linguists should make themselves useful by agreeing on a standardised *spelling* of the different terms of self-designation.

