



# WHOSE HERITAGE?

THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL OWNERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

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**W**riting in the early 1990s, Stuart Hall noted that subjects, genders, ethnicities, regions, and communities, "hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentred and subaltern, have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time." Even mainstream institutions like museums, which tend to "divide the population into those who possess the 'culture' and 'competence' to ...make sense of a visit and those who do not" consequently are being transformed by what Hall calls "the struggle of the margins to come into representation".<sup>2</sup> This is nowhere more apparent than in contemporary South Africa, where the recent publication of a blueprint for the resourcing of museums and other cultural institutions - *The Draft White Paper on Arts, Culture, and Heritage* - and challenges to the interpretive authority of large-scale exhibitions and

their curators, have thrown into sharp focus the country's present struggle to define and articulate its newfound status both as a democracy and nation.

Even before the publication of the *Draft White Paper*, which appeared in early June 1996, South Africa's new Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, published a proclamation in the *Government Gazette* (March 7, 1996) giving notice of its decision to curtail the budgets of state funded art galleries and museums with a view to developing "arts and culture in local communities and through this work to begin to change and redefine Visual and Performing Arts to include local and traditional cultures." According to the Ministry, redirecting funds in this way would give all South Africans "what is, in fact, their fundamental right, that is access to participate in and benefit from the cultural life of our country." It concluded that, because the arts, culture and heritage of the majority of South

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Africans "had never been developed through government recognition and support," this goal could only be achieved through structural transformation.

Some of these goals have since been fleshed out by Minister Ben Ngubane, and his Deputy, Brigitte Mabandla. In an interview with *The Sunday Independent* of June 9, 1996, Ngubane spoke of the "gradual realignment of energies and resources from a privileged to an underprivileged sector" as part of an attempt to achieve "national healing and regeneration," while Mabandla wrote in her foreword to the *Draft White Paper* that it was "through this document that we are laying a basis to reclaim our heritage". In the Paper itself, the Ministry acknowledges that it is dealing with "one of the most emotive matters to face the new government" because, whereas changes in the allocation of resources would be perceived by some "as a threat to identity, ... for others change is too slow."

Needless to say, the Ministry's belief that the custodianship of culture must be entrusted to communities rather than institutions has caused considerable distress in some museum circles. Sensationalizing the possible implications of this development, the president of the South African Museums Association claimed, recently, that many museums officials feared that they would be forced to sell off parts of their collections "because they don't have the staff or finances to look after them."<sup>3</sup> This, he maintained, was "the sad history of African museums. If you want to see anything of African history, you have to go overseas." It has also been suggested that, far from 'reclaiming' South Africa's cultural heritage, the White Paper is actually sacrificing part of that heritage, the so-called high arts formerly subsidised by the apartheid government as part of its attempt to affirm its identity as 'Western' or 'European' rather than 'African'.

The stark contrast between this image of a nation potentially or actually denuded of its cultural heritage, and the new Ministry's concern to achieve a sense of nationhood by acknowledging 'local' and 'traditional' cultural forms highlights the far-reaching implications of the present contestation of notions of heritage and identity in South Africa. But while formerly unchallenged cultural constellations have been destabilized through a new language of cultural ownership, evidenced in the use of the possessive pronoun, 'our', to signify the idea of an African rather than European heritage, South Africa's fledgling democracy certainly has not succeeded in developing a common understanding of what constitutes its artistic heritage and what 'past' it should, therefore, seek to pro-

mote and preserve in the present. Indeed, despite the African National Congress' monumental efforts to achieve national reconciliation since it came to power in April 1994, the country remains divided, not only politically but also culturally.

The reasons for this challenge to national unity are obviously far from simple. Liberal white academics like Prof Hermann Giliomee have accused the ANC of conducting a form of cultural hegemony in the name of nation-building.<sup>4</sup> Although he concedes that "much of the nation-building exercise is an understandable response to a long history of inequality and exclusion," he believes it to be of "a Jacobin, not a pluralist, variant." At the opposite end of the scale, a recent conference of black academics - who met to discuss the report of the National Commission on Higher Education - questioned the success of the government in challenging the cultural hegemony of South Africa's white elite. According to the *Mail and Guardian*, the theme of this conference was entirely unambiguous: "Political power may be largely in the hands of the black majority, but cultural and educational resources will continue to be dominated by what whites brought with them from Europe."<sup>5</sup> Others, like Neville Alexander, the present director of the University of Cape Town's Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, are cautious in their defense of attempts to create an "overarching national identity," but, like Stuart Hall, who calls for "a counter politics of the local,"<sup>6</sup> he sees these attempts as a necessary "defence mechanism against globalization." For Alexander this does not, however, amount to a celebration of ethnic difference or ethnic specificity. Believing that a policy of promoting multilingualism could achieve the aim of overcoming the stability of the 'bourgeois world,' thereby effectively blunting "the edge of ethnic prejudice," he remains committed to a "systematic and consistent discourse of process." Citing his reasons for this commitment to process, Alexander points out that, "one of the most pernicious elements of the colonial legacy is the Eurocentric interpretation of the relationship between language and culture and, specifically, the assumption that the language group and the cultural group are identical. In sloganized form, this notion reduces to the formula: one language, one culture, one nation [which] the ideologues of apartheid took ... to the point of grotesque absurdity." It was this that led Alexander to study the concept of cultures as "something historical, dynamic and transformable."

As these comments by Alexander and

others indicate, culture has become a major site of struggle since the African National Congress came to power in April 1994. Although situated firmly in the present, this struggle is predicated on an increasingly contested understanding of the past. Who should have control over cultural sites and whose interpretations of the past and present are to be conveyed to future generations has therefore become a matter of heated debate. The far-reaching implications of these debates was highlighted by a symposium organised by the South African Museum in Cape Town in November 1993, which culminated in the publication of a booklet entitled *The South African Museum and Its Public: Negotiating Partnerships*.<sup>8</sup> Writing in the introduction to this booklet, Bryan Krafchik indicated that curatorial authority had come under considerable scrutiny at the symposium. After posing the arguably crucial question: "Who decides what will be exhibited and what will be written [o]n the labels?," Krafchik noted that "a common criticism of the South African Museum's anthropology displays, which were produced 20 years ago, is that no Africans participated in planning the exhibitions. This has contributed to the perception that the museum as a colonial institution that portrays African culture as being tribal and unchanging." He concluded that the way foreword "seems to lie in the consultation of those people whose material culture is exhibited, so that they will become active participants in the exhibition process."

The powers of representation and hence of control vested in public institutions can no longer taken for granted. Since museums receive public monies, there is, in fact, a growing recognition that they have "a responsibility...to handle sensitive material and issues in such a way that earlier oppressions are not compounded."<sup>9</sup>

This goes some way towards explaining the more negative responses to *Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture*, an exhibition on the Khoisan or *Bushmen* mounted by artist, Pippa Skotnes, at the National Gallery in Cape Town in April 1996. Although Skotnes went to great lengths to consult the descendants of the many Khoisan communities and individuals whose harrowing experiences of exploitation, genocide and abuse the exhibition seeks to document, she has been accused repeatedly of reproducing rather than re-presenting this history. The Griqua National Conference of South Africa has been particularly vociferous in this regard, claiming that the exhibition amounts to little more than a "re-entrenchment of academic and intellectual hegemony, self-aggrandizement and

re-appropriation and re-colonisation of our material culture."<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, the Khoisan community from Schmidtsdrift, Namibia, questioned the display of nudity in the Khoisan body casts obtained from the storerooms of the South African Museum. "To show these things here," they said, "is just as bad as the people who did those things long ago. It is continuing the bad thing....In the future, when children see a Bushman, they will think about us in this bad way that we have been displayed in this exhibition. This is a big insult to us."<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, it was Skotnes' own negative responses to the Bushman diorama at the South African Museum - a two minute walk across the Company Gardens from the South African National Gallery - that first triggered her decision to mount an exhibition on the history and material culture of Khoisan communities.<sup>12</sup> While doing research on some of the rock paintings exhibited in close proximity to this diorama, Skotnes recorded a plethora of grossly distorted, implicitly racist comments by independent tour guides. Among these were statements like: "The Bushmen were nocturnal, and slept in hollows in the ground during the day, coming out at night to hunt" and "The Bushmen could eat fourteen kilograms of meat at a sitting, and were different from other people because of their genitals."<sup>13</sup> In the light of these comments and of some of the problems raised

by the diorama itself, which images of the *Bushman* as a timeless community of hunter-gatherers. Skotnes decided to mount an exhibition that she hoped would raise questions not only about the Khoisan and their history, but also about the display and storage practices of museums.

Some of the ideas informing the *Miscast* exhibition are set out in an article Skotnes co-authored with Malcolm Payne. Skotnes and Payne argue, for example, that their "position is that the exhibition itself, as conceived by its curator, is a site of creative construction and recontextualization, and the role of the curator as author of the exhibition requires critical attention. Not only should this curator, creator or author as a museum professional be making transparent their understanding of the social and aesthetic values of their institution (values which may well be honed through research and consultation), but they should not provide the only voice heard by their visitors."<sup>14</sup> Here and elsewhere in their article, their thinking is clearly informed by a highly reflexive engagement with issues of difference and representation. In keeping with this position, they assumed the impossibility of recovering an "original" context, "given the complex networks of political, social and historical relationships that govern its functioning." And they are entirely unequivocal in affirming the museum's potential both to mediate

between cultural groups and to construct cultural identities.

In her carefully argued account of the politics surrounding the controversial *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition mounted at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 1989, Mackay points out that approaches like that of Skotnes and Payne are in fact quite problematic because they ignore "the way museums are perceived by large sectors of the general public."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, far from endorsing the deconstructive practices of contemporary museum curators, marginalised communities often experience as doubly disempowering sophisticated post-modern reflections on their status as victims. Because such communities tend to work with stable notions of truth that can be and are mobilized in their ongoing claims to cultural and other resources, they require an entirely different presentation of their histories and their struggles against colonization.

It is an amazing testament to the increasingly resourceful ways in which marginalized communities conduct their struggles over representations of history that although Skotnes' overwhelming focus on the destruction of Khoisan communities was widely criticized, the exhibition was also used to advance the claims to land and other resources of present-day communities in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. At the opening of the exhibition the

Opposite (and page 34): "Miscast", 1996. Installation view (detail) at the South African National Gallery.



Khoisan guest speaker, Kiwiet, failed to make a single reference to the exhibition itself. He chose, instead, to use the occasion to speak eloquently (through interpreter, Megan Bieseke) about the pressing concerns of his own community, their attempts to secure their land against the onslaught of cattle herders, and their desire to protect and preserve their cultural values in the face of external threats. He began his address by saying: "Our main concern is with our rights, and our rights to our land and our resources." He also told the audience that: "We think that a lot of the trouble in the world comes from the fact that people don't stay in their own place... We think that everything would be much simpler if people stayed where they came from and took good care of their land and did not invade other peoples' land." Careful to establish a relationship between these claims and the need to teach children "the old things," he sought repeatedly to develop a link between cultural and natural resources, noting, for example, that "We will only be able to hold onto our land if we can still use our old knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

The following afternoon, at a seminar organised to give other descendants of Khoisan groups the opportunity to voice issues of concern to them, *Miscast* again became the focus of attempts to affirm the land rights of communities anxious either to reclaim or secure what they regard as their ancestral hunting and gathering grounds. Hunter Sixpence summed up the sentiments of many of the other community representatives who attended this meeting when he told the audience that: "We are looking for land and human rights and the end of discrimination TODAY!"<sup>17</sup> But it was Kipi George of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities of South Africa (WIMSA) who articulated their concerns most fully when he claimed that: "The San in southern Africa have the big problem of getting rights to land and natural resource. Today, most of the 100,000 sisters and brothers, living in southern Africa, have lost their land." This, he maintained, had led to a situation where "Most of us make our living by serving other people who utilize our forefathers' land and natural resources. In Caprivi, where my home is, the government gave us four hectare plots of land to cultivate crops. We received no land for cattle and game, and we cannot gather bush food and utilize trees in the forest. We are still powerless because other people make decisions about our resources." He concluded by saying that "We want to organize ourselves to regain some rights to the land of our forefathers."

What began as one person's response

to the Bushman diorama in the South African Museum thus became a platform from which some of the descendants of the people it depicts sought to publicize the pressing concerns of communities whose land rights remain insecure and whose cultural practices are threatened by external pressures. Viewed in these terms, the shocking images of exploitation, destruction, and death contained in the exhibition itself were transformed into a usable cultural resource by community representatives who seem to believe that it is still possible to establish impermeable physical boundaries in the interest of preserving seemingly timeless cultural identities. In doing so, they succeeded not only in undermining Skotnes' curatorial authority, but also in challenging the exhibition's arguably problematic commodification of suffering - depictions of starvation, execution, and imprisonment that the Griqua National Council described as a dehumanizing "exposition of domestic genocide reminiscent of Auschwitz."

But what of the fact that *Miscast* also provided an effective vehicle for the articulation of ethnic or group identities that fly in the face of present attempts to heal the wounds of the past by forging a common or national identity? While it is hardly surprising that the exhibition has drawn sharp criticism from some quarters on this account, recent claims that the ANC is insensitive to difference and diversity do not bear close scrutiny. It is certainly not entirely coincidental that, like the Khoisan representatives quoted above, the *Draft White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* affirms the need to celebrate diversity by claiming that "Cultural expression and identity stand alongside language rights and access to land as some of the most pressing issues of our time." Although South Africa is obviously struggling to come to terms with the legacy of apartheid, in particular the former white government's cynical exploitation of cultural difference, Brigitte Mabandla argued, recently, that building "national consciousness and recognizing ethnic identities are not mutually exclusive activities." On the contrary, the time had come to place the arts, culture and heritage center stage so that they could "fulfill their role in providing South Africans with a sense of self-worth and identity while contributing to the economic and social development of the country."

This growing concern to harness the pride people take both in their past and in their present creative endeavors underlines the rapidity with which the institutional custodians of culture are being overtaken by those formerly confined to the margins.

For, by encouraging communities to turn their own cultural resources into a source of on-going and much-needed income, South Africa's present government is actively engaged in facilitating a radical transformation in the power relations between those who produce and those who, at least historically, have consumed the cultural products of marginalized communities, not only in the market place, but also in the publicly-funded galleries and museums that are now being forced to compete for resource with community centers and other informal cultural bodies. For this reason, South Africa is likely to witness a significant shift both in the control of cultural sites and resources, and in the ways in which they are interpreted.

#### Notes

1. N. Merriman. *The Role of the Past in Contemporary Britain*. Unpublished PhD. thesis, Cambridge. Quoted in Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past. Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (Routledge, 1992), p.125.
2. Stuart Hall. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in Anthony D King, *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (Macmillan, 1991), p.36.
3. There has been a 20% cut in the museums budget since 1990. *The Argus*, 21 May 1996, p.7.
4. *Cape Times*, 21 February 1996, p.6.
5. *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 10-16 May, 1996, p.12.
6. Stuart Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In Anthony D King (ed), *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (Macmillan, 1991), p.61.
7. Neville Alexander, "Language, identity and nation building." *The Sunday Independent Higher Education Review*, 23 June 1996, p.4.
8. Unfortunately this booklet, compiled by Bryan Krafchik and published in 1994 by the South African Museum, Cape Town, is no longer in print.
9. M. Nourbese Philip. "The White Soul of Canada," *Third Text*, 14, Fall/winter 1991, p.76.
10. Address by Advocate Mansell Upham in his capacity as mandated legal representative of the Griqua National Conference of South Africa at the 'Indigenous Peoples' Symposium' held at the National Gallery, Cape Town, 14 April 1996.
11. Comments from the people of Schmidtsdrift, Kuru, Namibia, in response to the *Miscast* exhibition.
12. Pippa Skotnes speaking at a seminar in the Anthropology Department, University of Cape Town, 17 May 1996.
13. These and other, similar quotations are listed in Skotnes' discussion document for the exhibition and the accompanying book edited by her and entitled *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (University of Cape Town and Juta Press, 1996).
14. Pippa Skotnes and Malcolm Payne, "The Art of the Curator: Exhibiting art in Contemporary South Africa", *Social Dynamics*, 21 (1), Winter 1995.
15. Eva Mackay, "Postmodernism as Cultural Politics in a Multicultural Nation: Contests over Truth in the Into the Heart of Africa controversy", *Public Culture*, 7, 1995, p.416. My thanks to Salah Hassan for drawing this article to my attention.
16. These comments were transcribed from the video recording of the opening made by Jon Weinberg, the Head of Exhibitions at the South African National Gallery. I am very grateful to Jon for allowing me to borrow this video.
17. Transcripts of these and other community statements made at a symposium held on 14 April 1994 are available from the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

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