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Research Note

The Cape Khoekhoe: the appearance of a people presumed dead

Siv Oevernes,

Anthropology, University of Tromsøe.

E-mail: Sovernes@sv.uit.no.

*Siv Oevernes is currently a research fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Tromsø, Norway. She has funding from the Norwegian Research Council for her PhD project and is connected to the ongoing NUFU collaborative program between the University of Tromsø and the University of Botswana. Oevernes has previously (1998/99) done fieldwork among street people in Cape Town. For seven months she stayed in close contact with a group of strollers, and became aware of the delicate issues concerning Coloureds' ethnic identity in the New South Africa. This was her introduction to feelings and sentiments on Khoekhoe ethnicity and resulted in a thesis: *Being a Stroller. Being a Survivor. Being a Khoekhoe. Ambiguous Meetings with Street People in Cape Town, South Africa.* (Oevernes 2002 a) and a film *Time Can Do So Much* (Oevernes 2000 b). Oevernes is planning fieldwork in Cape Town from early/mid 2003 and will be associated with the University of the Western Cape.*

The following is a short outline of a research project that will focus on processes of ethnic ascription among people commonly labelled Coloureds of Cape Town in South Africa. A growing number in this group today claim to be Khoekhoe. This would not pose a problem, if it had not been that the Khoekhoe are widely considered to be an *extinct* indigenous people. This project will explore how it is possible to claim an ethnic belonging, which to a large extent is being met with external suspicion and disapproval.

Thematic approach

To understand what is happening in Cape Town concerning ethnic identity, there is a need for theoretical models that can explain how and why certain social dynamics spur on processes of very specific ethnic self-ascription in highly heterogeneous and hybrid settings. As part of this research, the different indigenous movements in Southern Africa will be brought to the fore, and the complexities within the academic discourse concerning those who can and those who cannot claim to "be" indigenous will be exposed. What will also be exposed is the difficulty in dealing with the Cape Khoekhoe from within this academic discourse.

I follow Bourdieu in assuming that there is no meaning or opinion, which can be seen as liberated from a field of doxa "...that which comes without saying and hence goes without saying" (Bourdieu 1977:167). I suggest that when fairly recently Khoekhoe groups claimed to be alive in Cape Town such an established "truth" was being questioned. It has somehow been taken for a fact that the indigenous people of South Africa, lumped together as the Khoisan, slowly have "died out". It became part of the field of doxa, and in recent best selling historical literature on South Africa, Sparks (1997:12) claims that no San is alive in South Africa today, and that "...the Khoikhoi too are extinct". The confusion is hence complete when a whole group of people are emerging, claiming to be Khoekhoe, fully alive and proudly aware of their cultural heritage. It is a puzzle to Southern Africa's public- as well as academic opinion.

The new South Africa

Today, the South African government emphasises the positive impact of the many cultures, languages and people to be found in the country. A celebration of this heterogeneity is taking place, and this is included in the building of the “imagined community” of the nation state (Anderson 1983). Ironically, this has led the Coloureds into a “cultural void”. As other people in South Africa can celebrate being Tswana, Zulu or Boer, for example, and not merely white or black; the Coloureds have been thrown into a state where new categories must be created. Whereas whites and blacks can emphasise their ethnic and cultural “belonging”, the Coloureds are set in a situation asking, “Who am I?” There does not appear to be any “essence” of an “own culture”.

In trying to trace the Coloured identity in historical writings, I am faced with a problem.

Some of my sources (Lewis 1987, Ross 1989), wonder if the apparent *little* writing on Coloured politics, identity and culture has to deal with the immense problems in saying exactly who the Coloureds *are*. Adhikari (1993:9) says a more problematic issue is that the category Coloured was used in the apartheid state policy, but still, as it is used by many for self-ascription, he sums up a loose definition:

Coloureds define themselves and are defined by others, through a process of exclusion as those people who were neither African nor white and were assimilated to Western culture... Coloureds have therefore usually been conceived as being of “mixed race”.

There is hence a great deal of *mobility* concerning this ascription. Somebody who is ascribed by self and others as a Coloured might have the possibility to appear African or white in some settings. As a result of this, during the apartheid years, many Coloureds could “*pass for white*” and hence go to better schools, get better jobs, earn more pay and so forth, and then go home at night and “be” Coloureds. After democracy, I was told it was now about trying to “*pass for African*”, as many complained the “*jobs are only offered to the Xhosa*”. The colour of skin was still made relevant, but the rules of the game had changed.

The problem of authenticity

To continue to play with a constructionist approach to the complex issue concerning ethnicity in this setting, it can be said that the Coloureds have to come up with a solution as to who they “are” which has to fit in a terrain of crossing interests. Abner Cohen (1969) claims the appearance of ethnic movements has to do with a contest of securing certain goods that will benefit all the individual actors belonging to a specific ethnic group. This is an instrumentalist approach, which can be used to understand why some claim being Khoekhoe; they are engaging in a collective action to get some goods. The recurring claims to be indigenous in South Africa can be related to the possibility of regaining “lost land”. Still, it has to be acknowledged that the whole issue is much more complex, something well illustrated by the experiences from the Miscast exhibition (Skotnes 1996, Saugestad 1998).

Within the context of the New South Africa, there is a demand for “belonging to a culture”.

The Coloureds do not belong to “a” culture. The Coloured category hence *must* be deconstructed; and I suggest this is exactly what is happening when people claim to be Khoekhoe. There is a revitalisation of indigenous ethnic identity going on, being spurred on by the external demand for belonging to a homogenous “culture”. Still, the Khoekhoe are being laughed at for trying to “make up” a culture. Whatever they do, they are caught in the

trap of not being good enough. However, following Cohen (2000), the nagging and teasing on behalf of the Coloureds being “hotnots” might be one good reason why it has manifested itself as part of the social actor’s *self-consciousness* in the present ethnic self-ascription. Earlier they could not escape being associated with “the most primitive people of the world”; today they are not allowed to “come out of the closet” and call themselves Khoekhoe.

This places many Coloureds in a dilemma. Whatever they do, they are caught in the middle. What is more, and as my informants explained, to admit being a Khoekhoe is not easy, and to claim being something is of little worth when met with disapproval. Jenkins (1997) points to the importance of external recognition of a claimed ethnic ascription. For many in South Africa the public images of the now “dead” indigenous Khoekhoe do not at all resemble an urban, Afrikaans speaking and streetwise city dweller. Still, the Khoekhoe movement in Cape Town continues to grow and gain attention. This project will explore what people say themselves about such processes, and try to understand the social dynamics where the “halfies”, to borrow Abu-Lughod’s term (1991), are asked to be heard and taken seriously not as “extinct”, but as alive.

Even though some people in Cape Town claim to *be* Khoekhoe, they are generally, by public and academic opinion alike, not taken to be “true” or “real” indigenous. They are too modern, too like the Europeans, too little authentic. They do not “fit” in the equation concerning what “the indigenous” is commonly taken to represent. They are also a challenge for the more conventional indigenous groups who risk getting drowned by “halfies”, people who are “neither-nor”. The indigenous are commonly *not* associated with the descendants of those who stayed too close to the arriving Westerners; by adopting symbols, language and ways of life. The “true” indigenous were, and are, rather taken to be those who stayed furthest away from colonial centres, hence maintaining their “original culture”. They have also been the ones focused on for research purposes. It has also been this section of the indigenous people that recently has been in most need of protection from a majority nation state that continues to take advantage, leaving the indigenous peoples in poverty and without basic rights.

The United Nations Working Group for Indigenous Populations use the criteria of first-come, non-dominant, culturally different and the subjective criterion of self-ascription, to identify indigenous peoples (Saugestad 2001:43). Where does all this put the Khoekhoe? They can be seen to fulfil the above-mentioned criteria; but still only *just*. The pressing question that comes up is: *if the Khoekhoe are indigenous then aren’t we all?*

The main interest of the present project is *not* to decide on who can claim to be indigenous.

It leads to a “trap” where you have to be the judge and jury. It is already a matter discussed in the UN Working Group for Indigenous Populations, where the Cape Khoekhoe have also presented their case. What I am interested in, more than whether they “truly are” or “truly aren’t”, is how the Khoekhoe *themselves* explain their ethnic status as indigenous and *why* many call them “a fraud”. One of these frauds, which Jolly (1996:207) warns about, is built from the logic: “I am not black and I am not white – I must be indigenous”. This is however, one of the explanations I came to hear when little by little I got to know that some of my former informants claimed to be Khoekhoe.

Different experiences of being indigenous and different political agendas

In November 2001, the University of Tromsø hosted the “Forum for Development Cooperation with Indigenous Peoples”. The main themes circled around questions concerning protection of the indigenous minorities. San representatives from the !Xun and Khwe Community Trust, and from WIMSA, spoke eloquently about their background and

the objectives of their organisations. It can be asked whether the Khoekhoe, with their very special story, would have fitted in here at all. Their experience on what being indigenous means, would have been rather different from the experience of the other people present. The Khoekhoe could easily have been seen as a people trying to “steal” an identity that rightfully did not belong to them, as opportunists riding the indigenous wave. For many indigenous activists, the Khoekhoe are seen as a disturbing element in their important roles as agitators and leaders to protect their communities, some in direct danger of genocide. For the Khoekhoe, their feelings on being indigenous are of a rather different kind. They are *finding something they feel they have lost*, whereas the activists *fear to lose something they have*.

These are hence very different experiences on what it can mean “to be indigenous”. One is of seeking and finding, the other is of loss and suffering. Still, both experiences contain a great deal of *pain*. It is therefore a paradox that the main image of the indigenous people of Southern Africa has been, and continues to be, of a people living in perfect harmony with their surroundings – cast outside time and history. My main aim is not to try to prove if the Khoekhoe are “truly indigenous or not”, but rather to focus on why it is meaningful to claim this ethnic identity in today’s Cape Town.

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