



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Conference report: Khoisan identities and cultural heritage

Ross, R.J.

Citation

Ross, R. J. (1997). Conference report: Khoisan identities and cultural heritage. *Kronos: A Journal Of Cape History*, 24, 154-155. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

REPORT/VERSLAG

'Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference'
Organised by the Institute for Historical Research,
University of the Western Cape and held at the
South African Museum, Cape Town, 12 - 16 July 1997

ROBERT ROSS
University of Leiden

Three years ago, the first¹ Khoisan conference met in one of the most glorious conference locations imaginable, a *schloss* - actually a large early nineteenth century country house - at Tutzing on the shores of the Starnberger See, a large lake in Bavaria. Throughout the three days of our meetings, the sun shone. Some delegates went swimming during the lunch break. I myself acquired a lasting taste for Bavarian *weiss* beer, and I doubt that I was the only one to do so. But at the same time we worked hard, in a conference dominated by linguists (it was after all in Germany) and anthropologists, with some input from historians, archaeologists and rock-art specialists.

Of course, not all was peace and harmony. The "Great Kalahari debate" had not yet died of exhaustion, as most academic disputes tend to do, but was still smouldering away, its embers fanned by the personal animosities of various of the participants (in both the debate and the conference). It was, however, in its way the last colonialist conference. Foreigners outnumbered Southern Africans. There was no-one present whose mother tongue was one of the Khoisan languages, and the descendants of such people were also virtually absent.

The second such conference, held in Cape Town in July, was a very different affair. It was at once academic symposium, cultural manifestation and political forum. It began with a parade through Government Avenue between the Houses of Parliament and Botanic Gardens of Cape Town, from the South African Historical Museum to the South African Museum of Natural History where Khoisan bodies casted in plaster are still being exhibited. The academic sessions were interlarded with meetings in which cultural and political demands were aired, and indeed the discussions of the papers (generally too short) were often conducted on two levels, both that to which the academics are accustomed and that which emanated from the popular consciousness. In my appreciation, the academics often did not know how to cope with the latter, and tended rather naively to give ground. It was as if they did not have sufficient confidence in their own professions, or felt in some way guilty when what they said did not

1. There is some dispute as to whether the Bleek and Lloyd conference in Cape Town in 1991 should count as the first general Khoisan conference. My numbering, somewhat arbitrarily, assumes that it does not.

precisely accord with the particular, and not necessarily representative, views being expressed by those who had come as activists. No one, for instance, had the nerve to suggest that the minute's silence in memory of Saartje Baartman should be followed by one in memory of those who died at the Battle of Dithakong.

At least five not altogether compatible agendas were being addressed, of which the academic was probably the least important. The others included: demands from Namibian and Botswanan San for land and other rights; Griqua claims for pre-eminence in the resurgent Khoikhoi movement in South Africa, symbolised at the beginning of the conference by the Griqua national choir singing Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, Die Stem and the Griqua National Conference's anthem as if they were equals; internecine struggles between the various Griqua groups and factions; and the manifestations of an emergent Khoisan consciousness from within the 'coloured' community, although there seemed to be more people claiming to be chiefs than to be Khoikhoi commoners. The possibility of claiming status as indigenous peoples, with considerable resulting advantages, has clearly galvanised many minds, although to my mind it is unclear why Khoikhoi in South Africa can claim this, and the Xhosa or Zulu, for instance, not. I would not care to predict where this will all lead, in the tortuous cultural politics of the New South Africa. Clearly the appreciation of Khoikhoi cultural substrata among those who do not speak a Khoisan language can have important psychological effects. I am sure, though, that I was not alone in finding the spectacle of a tradition being invented not merely fascinating but also disquieting. One thing is certain: Khoisan studies will never return to their ivory tower, or rather stucco *schloss*.

This number of *Kronos* contains some of the academic papers presented to the conference. Given this journal's remit, naturally enough the editors selected from those papers dealing with the history of Khoisan peoples in what used to be the Cape Province. It is worth making two points in this regard. The first is to note how pleasant it is that it has proved possible to fill a whole issue of *Kronos* with such papers. Not so long ago, this would have proved most difficult, if not impossible. It is good to see how the field has been attracting more and more scholars, for whatever reason.

The second point I would like to make is that, as a consequence of this development, it has been much more generally accepted that the history of the Khoisan peoples is an integral part both of Khoisan studies in general and of the broader history of Southern Africa. On the one hand, history has taken its place alongside anthropology (both physical and social), archaeology, linguistics and rock art studies, to the mutual benefit of all these disciplines. On the other, the general renaissance of studies of Cape history and the high profile debates on the history of the Kalahari and its surrounds (though largely not conducted by people who would in the first instance describe themselves as historians) have reintegrated what had become a fairly marginal enterprise into the rapidly diversifying narratives of South African history. These developments, exemplified if not produced at this conference and in the papers of this issue of *Kronos*, are thoroughly to be applauded.