

The Self-Image of Jacob Adams

Robert Ross

During the early nineteenth century, the debate began among the colonists as to who the Bushmen were (Ross 1993; Raum forthcoming; Bank 1995). On the one hand, Dr John Philip argued that those who were then known as Bushmen were in fact Khoikhoi victims of colonial oppression. As he put it, "Deprive [a pastoral people] of their flocks and herds, and you scarcely leave them any alternative but to perish, or to live by robbery" (Philip 1828 II:1). Others on the liberal wing of Cape society, including Thomas Pringle (1834), would agree. On the other hand, Donald Moodie, paid by the Cape government as in effect a colonial apologist, tried to show that the *bosjesmans-hottentotten* were from the beginning of European records "a very different people" from the "Hottentots", that "they were then, as they still are, the scourge of every people possessing cattle", and that as a result "the theories which would trace the origin of this people to European oppression, are fully and satisfactorily disproved" (Moodie 1841;1855). This was almost certainly the majority view among whites in the Cape Colony. A third, intermediate position was argued by Dr Andrew Smith (1831), in an unjustly neglected article. He claimed, probably with more insight than either of his competitors, that "very great oppressions have been extended to the natives by the white population" which had led to the increase in the number of Bushmen, and that these oppressions were not "instrumental in giving origin to a peculiar community of individuals, which there is every reason to believe existed long before European influence approached even the confines of their country."¹

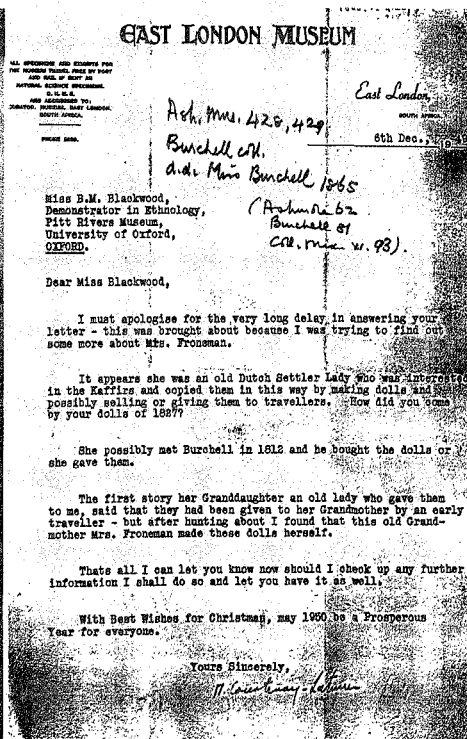
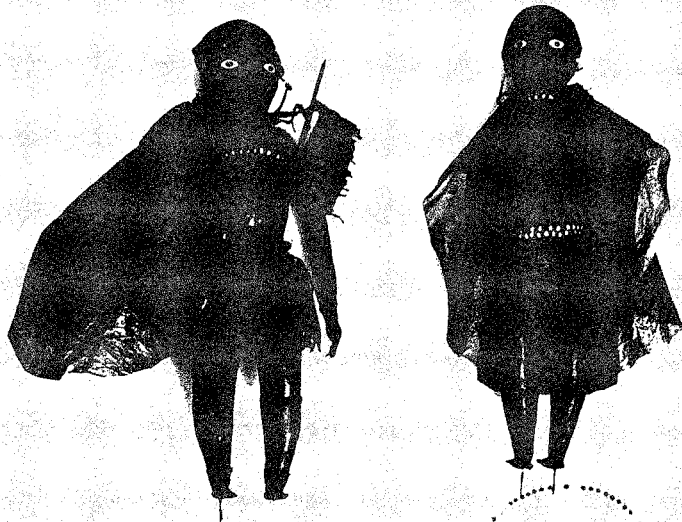
This is a debate which resonates with arguments

still going on today—and represented in this book. Indeed, current disagreements are in a very real way continuations of the exchanges of the early nineteenth century, even though the modern participants may not be aware of the fact and, believe it or not, are considerably less vitriolic towards each other. Modern authors, too, have the advantage that they can make use of a variety of texts which derive from, for instance, the Ju/'hoansi of the northern Kalahari. They can even directly ask the modern 'Bushman' for their opinions on academic theories (for example, Lee forthcoming). Historians of the more distant past did not have this option, and no European at the time, except perhaps Andrew Smith, seems to have imagined that the Bushmen themselves would have had anything to say on the matter, or that they should be anything other than the objects of an academic-cum-political argument.

The direct testimony of Bushmen before the middle of the nineteenth century is limited in quantity. There are a number of sentences, no more really, which the Bushmen protagonists in the long guerrilla war between them and the colonists are recorded as uttering. Thus, in the 1770s, Koerikei in the Sneeuwberg harangued the commando following him as follows:

What are you doing in my territory? You occupy all the places where the eland and other game are. Why did you not remain where the sun sets, where you first were?

Questioned further, he commented that "he did not want to leave the area of his birth, and that he would



Nineteenth Century Leather Dolls

Top left: Described as a female *Bushman*, this figure wears a finely pared red cap and cloak; green, white and blue bead earring, strings of black and white beads and an ochre-stained fringed skirt. A small navel is stitched on to the body and under the clothing are finely sewn and attached breasts and genitals. Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Top right: *Man in War Dress (Bushman)* Similar in dress to the female, the ears of this figure are separately stitched on, and he carries a small quiver containing arrows over the right shoulder. Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Middle right: A letter in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, kindly sent to me by Jeremy Cootes

Middle left and lower right: Dolls, labelled *Galika*, female and male in the collection of the Museum of Mankind, London. The dolls are finely stitched, each toe and finger separately articulated. The apron of the left figure covers a small penis and scrotum.

kill their herdsmen and that he would drive them all away" (Gordon 1988 I:81). Two generations later, with a different sort of poetry, Aventure, a 'Bushman' who had been brought up on a farm in the Nieuwveld, sent a message to its owner, one Viljoen, that when he was away, Aventure would return and "cut [Viljoen's wife] up for bill-tongue" (Steedman 1835 I:104-5).

Other direct comments by Bushmen are sadly lacking. Even that great standby of historians of the eighteenth century, the criminal records, are surprisingly bare of material on the Bushmen, despite the fact that they contain an enormous amount of information on the slaves and those known as 'Hottentots'. I know of only one unequivocal occasion when an individual described as a 'Bushman' was interrogated by order of the Court of Justice. This case relates to one David, who in 1768 was tried for sodomy. Nine years old at the time, together with a 'Hottentot', Suyverman, alias Couragie, he had run away from the farm in Outeniqualand where they had been held more or less captive. They had then been taken up by a runaway slave, Apollo van Mallabar, and repeatedly raped by him.² Like all such testimonies, David's interrogation, which runs to about a page and a half of manuscript, is thoroughly matter of fact, but the facts to which it relates only have to do with what was then considered his crime, and sheds no light on his circumstances or his opinion of them. For the rest, Bushmen do not seem to appear as witnesses or defendants, not even in the remarkable case of 1753, in which Jacobus Botha was accused of having arranged with the local Bushmen under Captain Nemnathe to raid the cattle farms of those of his fellow colonists with whom he was embroiled in a dispute over land.³

The reason for this particular silence seems obvious. The Court of Justice could deal only with those within the orbit of the Colony, and Bushmen were, almost by definition, outside that orbit. Either they were outsiders, to be fought, exterminated or treated with, as the occasion demanded, or they were no longer Bushmen. Whatever their origin, those who were living on the farms were considered to be 'Hottentots', and individuals who by other criteria might have been thought of as 'Bushmen' were not so described.⁴

In these circumstances, the best place to look for the early testimony of Bushmen is in the records of the various missionary organisations which worked at the Cape from 1792 onwards. In particular, the Moravian missionaries are likely to provide valuable material, not only because they were the first group to set up mission stations in the Cape Colony but also because the Moravian tradition encouraged the recording of life histories by its adepts. One of the spiritual disciplines by which Moravians attempted to deepen their understanding of their own faith was the writing, and

regular rewriting, of their own autobiographies, which would later serve as their own auto-obituaries and, in particularly edifying cases, be published as such. This was perhaps rather too much to demand of the Khoisan converts who flocked to Genadendal in the early years of the mission but, nevertheless, the regular questioning of missionaries could lead to extensive testimonies.

This was indeed the case in the remarkable discussions held by Jacob Adams, a man who "by every information we could obtain, as well as by his whole appearance" appeared to be 100. The conversations took place through the medium of an interpreter, since Adams had never learnt Dutch, on 25 July 1808, some six days before "he departed gently into a happy eternity". They were then recorded in the Genadendal diary, and later published in the *Periodical Accounts* (Vol IV, 421–3). They are, I believe, worth citing *in extenso*.

Jacob Adams, the missionary⁵ recorded,

... is a genuine Bosjeman, which we did not know hitherto, and a son of their king. That the power of their kings is absolute, and they have a right to dispose of the lives of their subjects, who are under the most complete subjection to them, he showed by saying, that if they only moved their finger in anger, the people died. The nation of the true Bosjemans live beyond the snow-mountains, in the so-called Pampus mountains.⁶ They never suffer any stranger to come to them and if any of their people go away and become Christians, they dare not return, or they would be murdered. They are divided into various clans or hordes, each of which obeys the oldest as their chief, but these are subordinate to the king. They live chiefly by plunder. Formerly they, as well as all the other Hottentot tribes, were a quiet and well-disposed people, but being deprived of their land, and robbed of their cattle by the Europeans, they became, in their turn, savage, and given to plunder. Their religion consists merely in this, that they worship two rocks, which they implore chiefly for help in hunting. One of these rocks represents a woman, and the other a man. When they are going out to hunt, they first go to these idols, and entreat them for food. First they go to the male rock, and strike against it with a stick. If it sounds, they believe the report is heard in heaven, and that they will have success. But if it so happens, that they get nothing, they repair to the female rock, of which they pretend, that it is inhabited by a malicious spirit, and beat it well, upbraiding it, saying: "Why do you, by your hidden arms, cause all the game to be shot dead, so that we can find none". If they have succeeded, they extol the

virtues of these stone gods. They have no sacrifices like the wild Hottentots . . . The Hottentots and Bosjemans have however the same species of superstition, concerning certain influences. Jacob Adams related, that formerly, when a wild heathen, he had a tyger and fox, by which he could injure any man he hated. These creatures he had never seen, but they were running, wild in the wood' like all others; but if he wished to hurt his enemy, he only gave notice to them, and the victim was obliged by some means or other to meet them, when they would fall upon him, and tear or kill him. They also pretend, that such creatures inform them of the ways of people at a distance, and likewise about the decease of their friends or relations, or bring word to their distant connexions, of their own affairs or death.

The Missionary wished to hear more of the singular customs of the Bosjemans, but Jacob Adams desired his interpreter to tell him that he did not like to remember and relate such bad things, having at his baptism renounced the devil and all his works, and therefore wished to have nothing more to do with his old customs. When the Missionary perceived that he disliked the conversation, he broke it off, and entered into a pleasing and comforting review of the means of grace, by which our Saviour had delivered him from the service of sin and Satan, and translated him into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

What, then, should we make of all this? In the first place there is the ethnography. It is very dangerous to say that a witness, who had no evident motive for lying, is mistaken. Such arrogance is all too common among historians and others, who should rather be much more worried about why something was written which does not agree with what other people report. In this case, what Jacob Adams said about the powers of the Bushman king—even the very existence of such an individual—is not consonant with other descriptions of Cape Bushman ethnography. The egalitarian premise in our analyses of Bushman societies is very strong, which means that there is a bias against such sorts of descriptions, even when, as in parts of Namibia and the Ghanzi district of Botswana, the evidence is stronger (Gordon 1992a:25–8; Passarge 1907, cited in Lee & Guenther 1993:215). But in this case, perhaps Adams was merely, and probably unconsciously, attempting to give the impression that his own status within Bushman society was higher than it could have been. On the other hand, what Adams has to say about the forms of magic and religion in which the Bamboesberg Bushmen believed, though no doubt garbled by his own old age, by the misunderstandings of the interpreter and, probably above all, those of the

"LEATHER DOLLS of this kind are known from various European museums. They appear to have been collected in two stages, one group before 1840 and another after 1862, when some may have been exhibited in the Great Exhibition in London. The earliest documented examples were collected by William Burchell and were probably made by a Mrs Fronemann who gave them to Burchell when he passed through Bedford in the Eastern Cape in 1812. Although some museum records in Europe claim that dolls of this type were made by the 'natives', i.e. implying black indigenes, the dolls themselves follow the pattern of cutting and sewing used for contemporary European leather dolls and are undoubtedly of European inspiration. The dolls appear to have been made to represent black indigenes, but again, the documentation of the dolls is not very precise. European records claim that the dolls represent ethnicities as diverse as 'Zulu', 'Bushman', 'Betschuan', 'Galika' and 'Hottentot'. There are some dolls which appear to emphasise anatomical characteristics such as steatopygia and drooping breasts on the females and these may specifically represent Khoisan-speakers. The dolls are all dressed in ubiquitously 'African' or, to the nineteenth century viewer's eye, quintessentially 'primitive' clothing—karosses, aprons and loincloths of leather, but they are generally of little use in identifying the intended ethnic identity of the people represented. Most of the dolls appear to have been taken back to Europe by visiting travellers, missionaries and military men, as souvenirs of the 'savage' Africans whom they had encountered. Some of these dolls were then used in displays to represent the colonised 'other', and their similarity to, but emphasised difference from the generally gendered but sexless, dressed and 'white' leather dolls of the period in Europe would have been inescapable to a viewer of the period."

Anitra Nettleton
(1995 personal communication)

CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
BUSHMAN

A.M. 485, 496. Leather figures of BUSHMAN male and female, each in leather garments, the man with bow and arrows.

Capt. H.F. de Lisle, 1827.
Transf. from Ashmolean Museum c.1886.

Two accession cards for the leather dolls in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

SOUTH AFRICA
KAPFER

A.M. 427. Leather figure of KAPFER woman in winter dress.

Capt. H.F. de Lisle 1827.
Transf. from Ashmolean Museum in 1886.

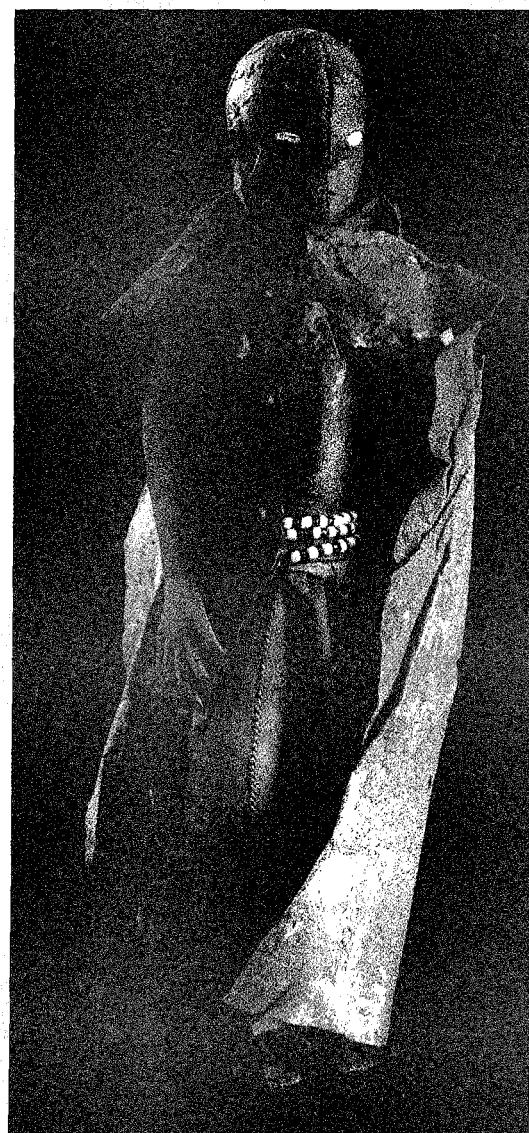


Leather dolls in the collection of the
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

Above: "Hottentotman" no. 2357-1

Below: "Kaffervrouw" no. 2477-70

Right: title not recorded no. 360-5804a



DOLLS.

Leather dolls described and illustrated in J.G. Wood, 1868. *The Natural History of Man*. London: George Routledge. Wood describes the dolls as having been made by "the natives" (26).

missionary, are at least understandable in terms of what is known about Cape and Drakensberg Bushman practices (Barnard 1992b:77–97).

Secondly, there is what Adams has to say on the relations between the “Bosjemans” and the “other Hottentot tribes”, and on the changing patterns of interaction between both of them and the Europeans. Two points are notable. First, Adams maintains that a distinction between the two groups of Khoisan existed, and that each had their own, slightly different, customs. In this sense, he does not agree with the point of view expressed two decades later by Dr John Philip—and a variety of modern researchers, though in somewhat nuanced form—that the Bushmen were in fact ‘Hottentots’ who had lost their cattle, and thus had been forced to take up a hunting, gathering and raiding life-style. On the other hand, Adams clearly agreed with Philip that the Bushmen had been brutalised by European colonisation. They lived by plunder because they had lost their land. Indeed, Adams’s descriptions of the drastic measures taken against those Bushmen who had, for a time, gone to live with the colonists can best be interpreted as attempts by the Bushmen to enforce solidarity in what was a very bitter struggle. After all, deserters in warfare anywhere in the world are likely to suffer such fates on recapture, particularly if they have joined the enemy.

It is in its last paragraph, though, that Jacob Adams’s description is of most importance. In his rejection of his old pagan ways and his wholehearted acceptance of the ideals propounded by the missionaries, Adams seems to have been the perfect convert. Indeed, it would be tempting to see such statements as attempts on Adams’s part to curry favour with the missionaries—or, if it was thought that a man who seemed to be a hundred years old and no doubt knew that he was within a week of his death would be unlikely to do that, on the part of his interpreter. This, then, would be yet another occasion for historians and anthropologists to rail at the cultural imperialism of missionaries, and to regret their role in destruction of indigenous cultures, or at the very least, and more trivially, in the partial recording of what was known about them.

Such arguments are not merely arrogant. They are also unjustified. Obviously, missionaries had to present the conviction that their own visions of this world and the next were superior to those their potential converts had held. A relativising missionary is certainly only a product of the twentieth century, and probably a contradiction in terms. For all that, there are enough examples of missionaries becoming sympathetic ethnographers, and indeed seeing their ethnographic work as a precondition of successful evangelism, for generalisations on the matter to be out of place. There is no reason to

doubt the sincerity of the missionary’s desire to “hear more of the singular customs of the Bosjemans”.

What is clear, however, is that at Genadendal a culture had developed in the interaction between the missionaries and the town residents in which reference to the pre-mission customs and history of the Khoisan was discouraged. In 1821, H.P. Hallbeck, the outstanding Moravian missionary in South Africa of his generation, wrote that he was attempting to collect their traditions respecting their origins and early history:

Our Missionaries here always thought that they knew nothing about it, but the fact is, that they were ashamed and afraid to tell their tales, as on their conversion to Christianity, they were led to despise their old sayings and customs . . . As the questions I put to [three old men] convince them, that I feel interested in their history, and that they need not fear rebuke, if they reveal to me their former national customs, whatever they may have been, they are quite unreserved (*Periodical Accounts* VIII, 197).

Nevertheless, the rejection of the old and the internalisation of the new was real, even if, of course, not everyone lived up to the ideals set by the missionaries all the time. (Neither did the missionaries.) Jacob Adams and others did not act as they did because they misunderstood what the missionaries demanded of them. They did so because of a genuine shame at their past actions, and because of a genuine wish to forget their old lives and to put them behind them (cf. Elbourne 1992).

Why should this be? It seems tragic that people should deliberately deracinate themselves, and graft themselves on to a foreign culture. This tragedy, though, is only a symptom of a far greater one. During the eighteenth century the invading colonists waged continual and very bitter war against the Khoisan peoples of the Cape. Land and stock was taken from them. Hunting grounds were cleared of game by people with weapons of destruction much more efficient than anything the Bushmen ever owned. At one stage, the Cape government gave the frontier boers permission to ‘extirpate’ the Bushmen. The psychological effects of this terror on those who survived cannot be underestimated. Many of them found a short-lived solace in brandy and dagga. Others again, the lucky ones, came to the mission stations, and found there another discipline by which they could give meaning and structure to their broken lives. It was in this context, we can assume, that Jacob Adams’s last testimony should be interpreted. Expressed as a rejection of his Bushman heritage, it was a rejection of the experiences he suffered, whatever they may have been, as he ceased to be a Bushman.