

“Burying Sara Baartman”: Commemoration, Memory and Historical Ethics.¹

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In 1994 the Griqua National Conference approached the new postapartheid South African government to have the remains of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman, returned to South Africa. Her remains (her skeleton, preserved genitalia and brain) were kept at the Musee de l’Homme, case number 33² in Paris, France, where they have been since her death in 1815. After 8 years of negotiations with the French government, Sara Baartman’s remains were returned to South Africa in 2002 where she was buried in Hankey in a traditional Khoisan ceremony on the 9th of August 2002.

This paper will firstly investigate how Sara Baartman is remembered in postapartheid South Africa. Sara Baartman’s name and image have been reassigned meaning within the new postapartheid state which is clearly voiced in the employment of her in several speeches by Thabo Mbeki and other government representatives³

*Thanks to my supervisor, Dr Sandra Swart for her help. This is still a very preliminary first draft and I would be grateful if it were not cited. Please contact me instead: 14956179@sun.ac.za.

¹ As Sara Baartman’s Khoikhoi name was never recorded we must content ourselves with using her Dutch name. As there are several differing opinions on the spelling of the name, it is necessary that I explain my choice of this spelling of Sara’s name. This spelling is closest to the Dutch version which is the language from which this name originated but it alters ‘Saartjie’ due to its offensive diminutive and restores it to its original form. This spelling – although obviously altered in a postcolonial manner which distances her from the racism that she experienced– is the closest to the original Dutch name that Sara was given. On a further note the Khoisan descendants are calling for the reinstatement of ‘Saartjie’ as they consider it a term of endearment for their ancestor while government officials employ the name that appears on her baptismal certificate ‘Sarah Bartmann’ with SAHRA representatives going as far as to say that this is in the fact the ‘correct’ spelling.

² P. R. Kirbey, “The Hottentot Venus”, *Africana Notes and News*, 6, 3, 1949. p.61

³ B. Gxowa, “Statement by Mrs. B. Gxowa, ANC MP, Delivered at the opening of the National Assembly during the debate on the State of the Nation Address by President Thabo Mbeki”, 2002. B. Mabandla, “Budget Speech by the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Mrs. Brigitte Mabandla, MP Budget”, National Assembly, 24 May 2002. Thabo Mbeki, “Speech at the

although in none so much as the speech given by Thabo Mbeki at Sara Baartman's funeral. This recommodification of Sara Baartman serves a political agenda which engenders reconciliation and nation building in South Africa by confronting the colonial past. This will indicate that the public memory of Sara Baartman has been shaped by this political exploitation.

Secondly this paper will explore how Sara Baartman has been commemorated since her burial. This section will focus on the gravesite of Sara Baartman on Vergaderingskop in the small Eastern Cape town of Hankey. The physical neglect of this site - which has been under the provisional protection of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) for the past five years – becomes indicative of the importance of Sara Baartman as a theoretical icon in South African politics, while the physical Sara Baartman is largely neglected or most likely, ignored. This section will also discuss the possible future plans for Sara Baartman's grave now that it will be declared a national heritage site on the 9th of August 2007⁴ – the five year anniversary of her internment in the area of her birth.

The last section of this paper examines the ethical issues that arise with the pending development of the gravesite for tourism. It also confronts the community division that this development already seems to be causing between the Xhosa community of Hankey who are largely impoverished and hoping to gain employment opportunities through tourism, and the Khoisan descendants who feel that they should

Funeral of Sarah Bartmann", Hankey, 9 August 2002. Thabo Mbeki, "Address of the President, Thabo Mbeki, at the Opening of the 51st National Conference of the African National Congress", Stellenbosch, 16 December 2002. T. Mbeki, "Address at the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of 1956 Women's March, Tshwane, 9 August 2006. T. Mbeki, "Address on the occasion of Heritage Day", 24 September 2006. B.S. Ngubane, "Budget Speech by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr. B.S. Ngubane M.P", National Assembly, 24 May 2002. B. Sonjica, "Speech by the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Ms. B. Sonjica on the Occasion of the Tribute to Sarah Bartmann", Humansdorp, 9 September 2003, B. Sonjica, "Deputy Minister B. Sonjica's address during the State of the Nation Debate", 10 February 2004.

⁴ Thanduxolo Lungile, Eastern Cape Provincial Manager for SAHRA, Community meeting at the Community Hall in Hankey concerning the declaration of the burial site of Sarah Bartmann as a national heritage site, 16 May 2007.

be the primary stakeholders and beneficiaries in this development. This will also lead to a discussion of the importance of Sara Baartman in South African identity politics.

Remembering Sara Baartman

Since Sander Gilman's article "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature"⁵ appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 1985, a great deal of academic literature employing Sara Baartman as an icon for scientific racism, sexism, colonial oppression and violence and the 'freak show' was published by academics analyzing race, gender, nineteenth-century science and colonialism.⁶ Zine Magubane has quite aptly labeled this as the 'theoretical fetishization' of Sara Baartman.⁷ Since the return of Sara Baartman's remains to South Africa the ANC government has used Sara Baartman in this type of 'theoretical fetishization' to illustrate how the country is trying to correct the misdeeds of its colonial past. When Sara Baartman is mentioned in speeches delivered by government she signifies not only the historical suppression of black South Africans, but also becomes a symbol of how this past is being addressed and corrected. Her 'homecoming' becomes symbolic for South Africa's new democratic order and the 'beginning of the end' of discrimination based on race and gender in this country. When one considers the current state of Sara Baartman's grave which will be discussed in the second section of this paper, it becomes clear that Sara Baartman has become nothing more than a theoretical signifier in South African political ideology and thus in the collective memory of South Africans as well. James

⁵ S. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late-Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature", *Critical Inquiry*, 12, 1985.

⁶ Z.S. Strother, "Display of the Body Hottentot", in B. Lindfors (ed.) *Africans on Stage*, (Bloomington; 1999).

⁷ Z. Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the "Hottentot Venus"", *Gender & Society*, 15, 6, 2001, p.818.

L. Gibson indicates that a “collective memory is a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past...[and] thus represents a society’s understanding of itself, especially its past.”⁸ Sara Baartman, through the manner and context in which she has been employed in speeches by several government officials, has become part of this collective memory about South African national identity.

Postapartheid South Africa has seen the rise of an obsession with nation building and reconciliation. This has culminated in cultural nationalism as a new nationalist ideology in order to reconcile and ‘build’ the nation.⁹ Within this cultural nationalism everyone in South Africa can claim an African identity while maintaining and acknowledging their individual ethnicity and culture within the spirit of ‘Ubuntu’.¹⁰ Aided by the TRC processes, ‘reconciliation’ entered speech in South Africa as a colloquialism. Through this process of reconciling individual apartheid perpetrators with their victims, hope was expressed that the population of South Africa could begin the process of reconciliation and begin the building of the nation by confronting the “truth” about the country’s colonial and apartheid past.¹¹

With the advent of Thabo Mbeki to the South African presidency in 1998 the prominent political ideology has shifted toward an Africanist stance in the form of Mbeki’s ‘African Renaissance’.¹² Yet, the focus has never truly moved away from ex-president Nelson Mandela’s prominent policy of reconciliation as can clearly be deduced from an analysis of Thabo Mbeki’s speeches.¹³ “The fact that we have gathered here together as compatriots, in conditions of freedom and peace, the

⁸ J.L. Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?*, (Cape Town; 2004). p.68.

⁹ C. Marx, “Ubu and Ubuntu: on the Dialectics of Apartheid and Nation Building”, *Politikon*, 29, 1, 2002.

¹⁰ Marx, “Ubu and Ubuntu”, *Politikon*, 29, 1, 2002.

¹¹ H. Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After*, (Harlow; 2001).

¹² Marx, “Ubu and Ubuntu”, *Politikon*, 29, 1, 2002.

¹³ See ref. 2, p.1 for some of these speeches. The list of speeches that at some point refer to the reconciliation of the South African people are far too numerous to list here.

descendants of Sarah Bartmann and Simone van der Stel...make[s] the statement that all South Africa has embarked on an unstoppable journey toward its rebirth.”¹⁴ Mbeki, more than any other politician, has called upon Sara Baartman when addressing the correction of South Africa’s history of racial and gender inequality and reconciliation.

It is against the background of reconciliation that the role of Sara Baartman will be considered. Sara Baartman has become an integral part of the reconciliation process and it is the role that she has been assigned by South African president Thabo Mbeki within this process that is producing the memory of Sara Baartman that the public is confronted with. Thabo Mbeki’s speech at her funeral becomes a clear indicator of the symbolization of Sara Baartman for political ideology:

“The story of Sarah Bartmann is the story of the African people of our country in all their echelons...We need to cast our eyes back to a period less than ten years ago. Then the state ideology, whatever the garments in which it was clothed, was firmly based on the criminal notion that some had been called upon to enlighten and tame the hordes of barbarians, as Sarah Bartmann was enlightened and tamed. The legacy of those centuries remains...This means that we still have an important task ahead of us – to carry out the historic mission of restoring the human dignity of Sarah Bartmann, of transforming ours into a truly non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country, providing a better life for all our people. A troubled and painful history has presented us with the challenge and possibility to translate into reality the noble vision that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. When that is done, than will it be possible for us to say that Sarah Bartmann has truly come home. The changing times tell us that she did not suffer and die in vain. Our presence at her

¹⁴ T. Mbeki, “Address of the President, Thabo Mbeki, at the Opening of the 51st National Conference of the African National Congress, Stellenbosch, 16 December 2002.

gravesite demands that we act to ensure that what happened to her should never be repeated.”¹⁵

Mbeki hereafter goes on to say that Sara Baartman’s experiences call on all South Africans to eradicate the legacy of apartheid and colonialism and to struggle to build a truly non-racial society “in which black and white shall be brother and sister”¹⁶ – thus a reconciliated society. Firstly, through linking Sara Baartman’s personal experiences to the experiences of the ‘African’¹⁷ people in South Africa, Mbeki ensures that Sara Baartman becomes an icon of the oppression of and violence towards South Africa’s black population during the colonial era. He continues to indicate that the ‘legacy’ of colonialism and apartheid – that of racism, sexism and white supremacy based on the inferiority and animal-like state of blacks which finds its basis in travelers’ accounts¹⁸ and found its validation in the science of the nineteenth century¹⁹ - is still experienced in South Africa. To oppose this he calls for the restoration of the human dignity of Sara Baartman. This is in turn linked to the restoration of the human dignity of black South Africans as a whole when Mbeki, in the same sentence, calls for the transformation of South Africa into a prosperous non-racist and non-sexist society that will benefit all its people. Thus, Sara Baartman’s return to South Africa and consequent burial is considered to be restoring her human dignity and this becomes a metaphor for the restoration of human dignity to South Africa’s black population after

¹⁵ T. Mbeki, “Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann”, Hankey, 9 August 2002.

¹⁶ Mbeki, “Sara Baartman”, 2002.

¹⁷ ‘Africans’ in this context refers to the black population of South Africa, rather than the more popular and all-inclusive version of ‘Africans’ in Thabo Mbeki’s ‘I am an African’ speech given at the adoption by the constitutional assembly of ‘The Republic of South Africa Constitutional Bill 1996’ in Cape Town, 8 May 1996.

¹⁸ See R. Elphick, Chapter 10: “The Khoikhoi and Colonial Society: Psychological and Cultural Aspects” *Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*, (Johannesburg; 1985) for analyses of the perceptions of the Khoikhoi in the accounts of white travelers to South Africa.

¹⁹ A. Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of ‘Hottentot’ Women in Europe, 1815-1817”, in J. Terry and J. Urla (eds.), *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis; 1995).

the dehumanizing effects of apartheid. The sentence illustrating that Sara Baartman has not suffered or died in vain as indicated by the ‘changing times’ is a significant one. Here, Sara Baartman is assigned the status of martyr. Her story becomes a lesson and rallying-point for postapartheid South Africa that is coming to grips with its history and that is preoccupied with reconciliation through the production of ‘truth’ about this history.

It is through the analysis of only a few excerpts of Mbeki’s speech at the funeral of Sara Baartman that the beginnings of her public iconisation can be discovered. In this sense, Sara Baartman was once again depersonalized and stripped of her humanity by becoming a symbol or signifier for another’s ideology and agenda –that of reconciliation and nation-building- as happened to her in her lifetime where she was a symbol for black female sexual alterity. Sara Baartman has become an icon in South Africa through her intrinsic attachment to racism and sexism, while her return to South Africa became symbolic of the end of these discriminations in this country. In addition to this Sara Baartman has gained ‘mother of the nation’ status in South Africa. This is partly the result of her Khoisan ancestry as the modern Khoisan descendants hold ‘First Nation Indigenous Peoples Status’ in South Africa which allows her to be considered as a ‘common ancestor’. Nealroy Swarts, a Khoisan²⁰ historian has voiced this status: “This is our grandmother. This is the nation’s grandmother”²¹ While Thabo Mbeki affirmed this sentiment when he speaks of “our grandmother, Sarah Bartmann”²².

²⁰ Where I use the term ‘Khoisan’ in reference to the groups that currently live in South Africa my meaning is that of descendants of the Khoisan. However, as these groups identify themselves as Khoisan and call themselves Khoisan I will use the term Khoisan when referring to them.

²¹ R. Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman, Born 1879 – Buried 2002*, (Johannesburg & Cape Town; 2007), p.177.

²² Mbeki, “51st National Conference of the ANC”, 2002.

The iconisation and symbolization of Sara Baartman is essentially a process of dehumanization. Few have attempted to give Sara Baartman a voice. Barbara Chasez-Ribaud in her fictional tale of Sara Baartman's life²³ and Rachel Holmes' recent biography in the form of 'popular history'²⁴ try to restore Sara Baartman's humanity by exploring her possible emotions and telling her story removed from the symbolic associations to scientific racism and sexism - although these will always remain an important part as determining factors in Sara Baartman's story. Although it can never be known what Sara Baartman truly felt this does not imply that this should not be explored. It is important to remove Sara Baartman from her symbolic associations and to attempt to recreate her *personal* story as this is one way in which to restore her humanity. Chasez-Ribaud and Holmes have attempted this, while a yet unpublished biography of Sara Baartman by Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais will most likely reveal new information about the life of Sara Baartman.

Commemorating Sara Baartman

Sara Baartman's grave is located in Hankey in the Gamtoos River Valley which is considered to be her place of birth. The grave itself is covered in large pebbles, some bearing pieces of paper with the image of the government-sanctioned image of Sara Baartman's face and surrounded by a metal fencing structure to protect it from vandals. The bronze plaque that indicated her grave was stolen in March 2005²⁵, and the information board is marked by graffiti. This is the current state of the grave which the South African government considers to be one of the country's most important icons in its quest for nation-building and reconciliation as indicated in the

²³ B. Chase-Ribaud, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*, (USA; 2003).

²⁴ Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus*, (2007).

²⁵ Ibid. p.190.

previous section. The gravesite has been neglected and ignored for 5 years and has still not officially gained the status of being a national heritage site. Despite this neglect a recent donation by SAHRA has begun the process of developing the gravesite as an important tourist attraction while a date has been set for the announcement of the declaration of the grave as a national heritage site.

Heritage and heritage tourism in South Africa has become an important way in which South Africans can confront the country's history and how this confrontation is presented to foreign visitors. However, heritage in South Africa is often a platform of political manipulation which will be shown in a discussion of Sara Baartman's grave below. This heritage site, while promoting national unity, has also become a site for division. This becomes an important point in the third section and is imbedded in Cynthia Kros' statement "that heritage cannot but continue to be divisive, as long as we cling to the particular identities that are the legacy of our peculiarly ethnically driven past."²⁶

For the past five years Sara Baartman's grave has been under the provisional protection of SAHRA as a national heritage site, yet it has still not gained this as an official status despite Thabo Mbeki declaring at the funeral that he was "honoured to announce that this place of final rest for Sarah Bartmann has been designated as a national heritage site."²⁷ SAHRA has recently completed its eleventh draft of the nominations document and has set the date to announce the official declaration of Sara Baartman's grave as a national heritage site for 9 August 2007.²⁸ This will be the five year anniversary of Sara Baartman's burial. The grave has gained grade I status under the act which implies that the site has qualities so exceptional that it is of

²⁶ C. Kros, "Heritage vs. History: the End of a Noble Tradition?", *Historia*, 48, 1, 2003. p.328.

²⁷ Mbeki, "Sara Baartman", 2002.

²⁸ Thanduxolo Lungile, Eastern Cape Provincial Manager for SAHRA, Community meeting at the Community Hall in Hankey concerning the declaration of the burial site of Sarah Bartmann as a national heritage site, 16 May 2007.

special national significance.²⁹ This significance has been discussed in the previous section where it is shown that Sara Baartman is a national icon for reconciliation in South Africa as a result of her personal history. The nominations draft echoes this in its statement of significance of the grave,

“The return of Sarah Bartmann speaks of healing from oppression, suffering, sadness and loss for her as an individual and the Khoekhoe. The site returned dignity to her and her ancestors. The site is a symbol that redefines our identity as the nation of South Africa, repairs our sense of community and brings back what we as South Africa and the world had lost about our humanity.”³⁰

While also explaining why the grave primarily qualifies for national heritage status because it is of “Such universal value and symbolic importance that it can promote human understanding and contribute to *nation building*³¹, while under secondary criteria it qualifies because of its,

“a) Importance in the pattern of South Africa’s History. The site embodies South Africa’s coming to terms with its past of neglect, confrontation, co-operation, dispossession and ultimate triumph of freedom and democracy”

c) Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of South African cultural heritage...

g) Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.”³²

Furthermore “...the site encompasses a new era, for South Africans and the Khoekhoe community, of reconciliation and coming to terms with an often sad, violated and

²⁹ National Heritage Resources Act of 1999, 7(1)(a).

³⁰ South African Heritage Resources Agency, “Nomination as a National Heritage Site in Terms of Sections 27(3) and 27(5) of the National Heritage Resources Act, 25 of 1999: The Site of Sarah Bartmann’s Grave, draft 11, 2 April 2007. p. 4.

³¹ Emphasis my own.

³² SAHRA, “Sarah Bartmann’s Grave”, p.5.

violent past.”³³ These extracts from the nominations document clearly indicate that in South African politics and for the public Sara Baartman’s significance is almost entirely due to her role in reconciliation and nation building. Yet despite this importance, the grave itself has been neglected. The metal fencing around the grave erected by SAHRA to protect it from vandals is one of the few activities that have taken place to restore some dignity to the grave. However, the metal fencing becomes eerily reminiscent and symbolic of Sara’s life on display as the Hottentot Venus - a ‘human curiosity’ - in England while also being culturally offensive to the burial practices of the Khoikhoi who believe that Sara’s soul cannot roam free because of this structure.³⁴ This is in direct violation of section 5(4) of the National Heritage Resources Act which states that heritage resources should be managed in a way that ensures the dignity and respect for cultural values. This seems mainly due to the fact that the site has been under the provisional protection of SAHRA and has thus received the minimal maintenance. However, some protection of the site was necessary and the fencing that is situated around the grave itself seems to have been the most cost-effective way of ensuring this.

The reasons for the five year delay in declaring the grave as a national heritage site have thus far been referred to as “technical problems”³⁵. Despite this delay, SAHRA donated three million Rand in August of 2006 to the Khoisan Reference Group in order to initiate a development program for the grave. This was in response to President Mbeki’s request that the project should be under way by 2007.³⁶ Although

³³ Ibid., p.5.

³⁴ Interview with Captain Hester Booysen of the Gamtkwa group, Hankey, April 2007.

³⁵ T. Lungile, SAHRA, Community meeting Hankey concerning the declaration of the burial site of Sarah Bartmann as a national heritage site, 16 May 2007. I would also like to record that I am still researching this delay but have thus far been unable to gain responses from the relevant SAHRA representatives who seem strangely insulted by negative media coverage of their handling of Sara Baartman’s grave.

³⁶ Liebenburg, “Groot planne”, *Our Times*, 18 August 2006.

no plan has been finalized, the Khoisan Reference Group has a very clear idea of how they feel the grave should be represented to tourists.³⁷ For the Khoisan descendants the grave is a spiritual site that should be approached with the respect that is necessary when nearing the grave of an ancestor. It is within this cultural practice that they feel that no development should occur at the grave itself. They insist that the fencing structure be removed from the grave, while the walk up the hill to the grave itself should bear certain markers that invite the visitors to the grave to reflect on Khoisan culture and ask that they approach the grave with a sense of respect for Sara Baartman. Furthermore, with further initial Lotto funding and consequent funding from SAHRA – whose responsibility the maintenance of the site will be once it has been declared a national heritage site – the Khoisan Reference Group hopes to purchase a section of land that is overlooked on by the gravesite in order to develop it as a Khoisan cultural centre. A group of 28 4th year architectural students from several countries have designed a model for this centre after the Gamtkwa House in a pro-active move after gaining the initial funding, contacted the Department of Architecture at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.³⁸ It is hoped that this model will be accepted and constructed once the land necessary for this construction, has been purchased. Here the visitors should be able to learn more about Khoisan culture as experienced by the ancestors of the Khoisan of the Gamtoos River Valley and their modern descendants and to learn more about the story of Sara Baartman within this context. In addition to this, they want to establish an area within this centre in which the differing Khoisan groups can come together during important community rituals to encourage the

³⁷ The information that follows has been gained from interviews with Kobus Reichert, the heritage representative for the Gamtkwa House who live in Hankey, and Captain Hester Booysen, the captain of the Gamtkwa. This information is merely an idea for the development of the site as nothing has yet been formally decided upon.

³⁸ C. Liebenburg, “Groot planne vir graf”, *Our Times*, 18 August 2006.

development and continuity of Khoisan culture. During this time, the area in which these events will take place, will be closed to visitors.³⁹

These are the current plans that the Khoisan Reference Group hope to implement once the funding for such a large project has been obtained. Currently, the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve is drawing up a management plan for the grave of Sara Baartman which envisions the grave as a portal to the Mega Reserve and thus an extension of tourism into the area.⁴⁰ The question must be asked however, if these plans are viable in consideration of the locality? The town of Hankey is underdeveloped and offers little in terms of tourist facilities. In addition it does not lie on any tourist route which would encourage tourists to visit the grave. Although the development of the gravesite into a tourist attraction could attract day visitors to the area, without the appropriate tourist facilities it will not translate into the hoped for economic development of the local community which is expressed on the information board next to the grave. But this will be further discussed below where SAHRA's ideas for the grave will be considered. The discrepancies that exist in the plans for the development of the grave site that the Khoisan Reference Group is proposing and those of SAHRA, will be discussed in the following section and reflects largely on the issue of who should benefit from this development and thus engenders a larger ethical question; significantly so in terms of re-exploitation and identity.

Historical ethics

Despite the fact that some sort of development of Sara Baartman's grave is long overdue, it is necessary to ask the question if it is in fact ethical to use Sara Baartman

³⁹ Interview with Captain Hester Booysen of the Gamtkwa House and Kobus Reichert, Heritage Representative of the Gamtkwa House, Hankey, April 2007.

⁴⁰ T. Lungile, SAHRA, Community meeting Hankey concerning the declaration of the burial site of Sarah Bartmann as a national heritage site, 16 May 2007.

as a tourist attraction that – with the parallel development of tourist facilities in the town itself – inherently translates into economic benefit for the community of Hankey. During her lifetime in England and Paris, Sara Baartman was displayed as a ‘human curiosity’ for the economic benefit of the men that put her on display. If Sara Baartman is once again put on display for the public it needs to be considered as a case of ‘history repeating itself’. It is not only on the personal level that such a question should be considered but also on a community and spiritual level. In Khoisan culture the graves of dead ancestors should remain undisturbed, and if approached, should be approached with a deep sense of respect for that ancestor. Thus, in addition to what has been mentioned in the previous section with regard to possible development plans, it is necessary to balance the need for the economic development of the community with the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Khoisan people: a balance between respect for the needs of the living and the respect for the honour of the dead.

The first question that must be addressed is whether it is ethical to use Sara Baartman for economic gain. When one separates this issue from its social context the answer would be a vehement ‘no’. Sara Baartman’s display on stages in England and France as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ as a “truly interesting object of natural history”⁴¹ amongst the ‘freak’-shows of Piccadilly, London, was dehumanizing. It reduced Sara Baartman to the status of object, who as a black female from southern Africa in the nineteenth-century, was the embodiment of the exotic and of untamed sexuality.⁴² Now, two centuries after her time as the Hottentot Venus she will be put on display again albeit within the modern context of postcolonial Africa and postapartheid South

⁴¹ Strother, “Display”, in *Africans on Stage*, (1999), p.25.

⁴² This short paragraph of Sara Baartman’s display is due to the fact that this paper does not wish to discuss her already often documented and analysed life on display as the Hottentot Venus. It merely wishes to serve as a parallel to illustrate what is occurring in South Africa presently with regard to Sara Baartman as a tourist attraction.

Africa. Using Sara Baartman as a tourist attraction in order for this to translate into economic gain would simply be a reliving of the past - only the agenda differs. This time, her display – although not of the physical Sara Baartman- will not benefit a few white men, but will benefit those that currently inhabit the area of her birth. And it is within this context that the development must be discussed.

Hankey, which is situated in the Eastern Cape, is an extremely impoverished area of South Africa. For many of its inhabitants the eventual development of the grave brings with it the hope of the creation of jobs and the consequential –and much needed - economic development of the area through tourism. As mentioned above, for this to retain some sense of respect for the life and memory of Sara Baartman there needs to be a balance between the need of the living and the respect for the dead. Here the Khoisan Reference Group’s proposal would be completely suitable, although under no circumstances should money be charged to allow access to the grave. Economic benefits should be reaped through job creation and services for tourists rather than through charging entrance fees. Entrance fees would be nothing other than a reminder of Sara Baartman’s time on display at Piccadilly which should be avoided.

The community meeting organized by SAHRA discussed the development of the grave of Sara Baartman. This meeting, fraught with political jargon, was attended by several Khoisan representatives and community members and a large Xhosa representation in the form of community members. As was voiced by one community member, the political jargon went over the heads of the community.⁴³ Despite this, most of the questions asked by community members concerned the creation of jobs. It was clear that Sara Baartman herself, who was barely mentioned by the SAHRA representative, was of secondary importance to SAHRA. The primary concerns were

⁴³ Community meeting Hankey concerning the declaration of the burial site of Sarah Bartmann as a national heritage site, 16 May 2007.

the structures within which the development would take place, and the lack of ‘capacity’ of the Hankey municipality to manage this site. This ‘lack of capacity’ meant the lack of educational qualifications of the Hankey community. It was made very clear that not everybody would receive a job and that the Hankey community’s main contribution to the development would be through unskilled labour in the building projects. However, the hope that the development will bring tourism to the area carries with it the hope that this will indeed benefit the community.

What became rather inherent to the meeting was the marginalisation of the Khoisan representatives who are conscious of historically being a marginalized ethnic group. The Khoisan representatives mostly raised questions regarding the manner in which Sara Baartman would be displayed and the contribution that such a site could be to the preserving of Khoisan culture. The response of the SAHRA representative and the representative of the department of Arts and Culture was to mostly waive such questions as not being important to the context of the meeting despite them asking for contributions from the public. Although such issues will probably be debated once the initial program for development is complete, these are the issues that primarily concern the Khoisan groups and they felt that it was significant to mention these so that SAHRA could take note of them.⁴⁴ Not only were they marginalized in this process but the series of meetings which took place from the fourteenth to the eighteenth of May 2007 also indicate the relative lack of consulting with the Khoisan people who feel that Sara Baartman as a Khoisan woman is firstly *their* ancestor. The meetings with the Khoisan community were labeled community meetings with the intention of ensuring that “immediate communities understand the purpose of site

⁴⁴ Ibid.

declaration and its intended development.”⁴⁵ The House of Traditional Leaders seems to have had the most significant contribution to the process as their meeting was intended for the Traditional Leaders to voice their concerns and to advise the project team. For the Khoisan groups this is seen as an attempt to by-pass their concerns and opinions about the development of their ancestor’s grave as no Khoisan representative serves on the House of Traditional Leaders.

This leads to the quandaries of identity in modern South Africa which are of significance and leads to a greater understanding of the issue of marginalisation mentioned above and also to an ethical questioning of Khoisan motivations.

Mohamed Adhikari’s book *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*⁴⁶ is one of the most comprehensive studies of coloured identity to date. It is to this work that I will turn in order to explain the origins of the Khoisan groups in postapartheid South Africa as part of a Khoisan Revivalist Movement. This in turn will clarify the current feelings of marginalization experienced by the Khoisan community within the context of the development of Sara Baartman’s grave.

The coloured people of South Africa are mostly descended from the indigenous Khoisan population of southern Africa, the Cape slaves and other black ethnic groups. This coloured population has been marginalized in South Africa due to their intermediary racial status which is “distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population.”⁴⁷ Within the context of the postapartheid state with its emphasis on multi-culturalism, people are allowed to express their identities as they wish. Adhikari refers to a study by Stellenbosch

⁴⁵ T. Lungile, “Proposed program for bi-lateral meetings with affected parties regarding declaration of burial site of Sarah Bartmann”, 20 April 2007. (received by e-mail)

⁴⁶ M. Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*, (Cape Town, 2005).

⁴⁷ Adhikari, *Racial Identity*, (2002), p.2.

University economists which indicates that in the period 1990-2000 the head-count of people living in poverty increased only among the coloured population of South Africa, while it decreased for all the other race groups.⁴⁸ This increase in poverty among coloured people and the government's emphasis on *black* economic empowerment has left the coloured population, once again, feeling marginalized. This has led to coloured people exploring their identities in terms of ancestry. Khoisan revivalism has been one of the most popular forms of expressing identity. Adhikari explains this:

“...the Khoisan identity is proudly affirmed as an authentic culture of ancient pedigree in place of Colouredness, which is repudiated as the colonizer's perverted caricature of the colonized. It is exclusionist in that the Khoisans' claim to being the true indigenes of South Africa, even when not articulated as a demand for first-nation status, nevertheless represents a new argument for a position of relative privilege.”⁴⁹

Thus some coloured people have taken on the Khoisan identity which appears to have more benefits than holding a coloured identity in present day South Africa. This is not to say that the modern Khoisan groups are simply coloured people hoping to reject their marginalization. For most it is truly a return to the ethnicity and identity of their ancestors which was denied to them during apartheid when they were classified as ‘coloured’. The perceived coloured racial identity of the Khoisan seems to be the reason for their relative marginalization in the development processes of Sara Baartman's grave in a town with a predominantly Xhosa population. Captain Hester Booyen voices this when she relates that the Xhosa population are benefiting from land restitution in the area, despite the fact that Hankey used to be the location of a

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.180.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.186.

Khoisan kraal.⁵⁰ The question of who will benefit from the development – the Xhosa or the Khoisan which indicates a division in this community along ethnic lines - was asked at the meeting in answer to which it was made clear that it will be of benefit to the whole Hankey community.

This is where the Khoisan claim to Sara Baartman becomes so significant. Although from interviews and conversations with several Khoisan descendants it is clear that the Khoisan do have a strong emotional attachment to Sara Baartman whom they view as an ancestor, the question needs to be asked if this is not also politically and economically motivated. As already mentioned, the Khoisan are not represented on the House of Traditional Leaders and so they feel that they are not yet officially recognized as a separate ethnic group in South Africa. Simultaneously, their claim as primary stakeholders in the development of Sara Baartman's grave is in response to the economic benefit that this project hopes to achieve in this impoverished community. However, it is necessary to view these motivations holistically. Those claiming Khoisan descent are serious about their ethnicity and spirituality as Khoisan people. Their ancestor, Sara Baartman has become a symbol to the Khoisan for their recognition in South Africa as a separate ethnic group.

Conclusion

This paper is not so much an historical observation as it is the analysis of the journey of a South African historical figure in modern South Africa. Although Sara Baartman's remains are buried, her memory is still alive. Her memory is employed in different political motivations by different groups in South Africa. In common with many other cultural groups, there is a widespread Khoisan belief that the ancestors

⁵⁰ Interview with Captain Hettie Booysen, Hankey, April 2007. This however is directly related to the Land Restitution Act where the cut-off date for claims is 1913, a time by which the original Khoisan groups had already disappeared.

should be honoured. But perhaps ancestors should also be allowed to move on and come to rest. In this sense, Sara Baartman has not yet been buried and has not been allowed to rest for the past two centuries. Arguably, the development of the grave, instead of bringing closure to the story of Sara Baartman is creating a new site of exploitation. Within this same context Sara Baartman has lost her humanity in South Africa's new nationalist ideology of nation building and reconciliation for which she and her story have become signifiers. Therefore it cannot be claimed that Sara Baartman is buried or that her story has come to a close. Her final resting place remains empty of her psyche which is now playing a further role in the identity politics of the country of her birth.

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