Review Essay: Talking in Tongues: Genocide and the San in the South African Imagination

GAIROONISA PALEKER
University of South Africa

Mohamed Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples*. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2010 (120pp.)

Post-apartheid South Africa adopted a new coat of arms with a brand new motto on Freedom Day (27 April) in 2000.[1] There are two significant features in the new coat of arms and motto that are relevant to the subject of this review article. The first feature is incorporated in the shield and is a representation of a San rock painting depicting two masculine figures that are mirrored.[2] The second feature is the motto itself which is in the language of the /Xam!. Translated, the motto reads 'diverse people unite or people who are different join together'.[3] President Thabo Mbeki's speech on the occasion of the unveiling pays homage to the San as the 'very first inhabitants of our land'.[4] According to President Mbeki, the /Xam! language was chosen because it is

> an ancient language of our people. This language is now extinct as no one lives who speaks it as his or her mother-tongue. This emphasises the tragedy of the millions of human beings who, through the ages, have perished and even ceased to exist as peoples, because of peoples [sic] inhumanity to others.[5]

There are several aspects of this rationale given by President Mbeki that deserve closer attention and which this article will return to at a later point. Of immediate relevance is the implication of genocide in Mbeki's speech. Ten years later, the idea that the destruction of the Cape San was genocide is raised again by a scholar. Mohamed Adhikari's most recent publication, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, argues that the destruction of Cape San people and society was nothing less than genocide.

Adhikari suitably takes as his starting point a clarification of his understanding of genocide. He adopts a definition of genocide that places emphasis on the 'intentional physical destruction of a social group'.[6] This destruction can be complete or partial enough for the group to be unable to reproduce itself either biologically or culturally, or unable to sustain any independent economic life. This definition is further elucidated by detailed explanations of key terms he uses throughout the book, such as 'intentional', 'social group', or 'physical destruction'. This definition of genocide is followed by a list of definitions used by, among others, Raphael Lemkin, who originally coined the word in 1944. The list of definitions also includes the one that is most popularly known: Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted in 1948.[7]

Adhikari eschews any of the terms used in the UN Convention such as 'ethnic, racial or religious' and opts instead for the use of 'social group' in identifying the victims of genocide. The significance of the term 'social group' rather than 'ethnic' group can be linked to the historical debate around differentiating between Khoikhoi and San based on physical features, language, culture and occupation. But as Shula Marks has shown in her seminal article on Khoisan resistance, the markers of differentiation were complex, fluid and inherently unstable.[8] An ethnic identity was thus not firmly fixed as many Khoikhoi joined bands of San hunter-gatherers, while captured San were often called Khoikhoi by settlers.

The issue of naming in relation to the San is controversial and has been keenly debated in scholarship with various appellations such as Bushman, San and Khoisan being used interchangeably. In his introduction Adhikari explains his use of the San as being less pejorative and gender specific than Bushman. It is also the term that

is used by most San leaders, organisations and advocacy groups such as the pan-San Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), or web organisations like the Southern African San Web Community.[9]

In chapters one, two and three – historical surveys of Dutch colonial expansion, frontier conflict and change under British colonial rule, respectively – Adhikari revisits existing scholarship on the Cape Colony during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This book differs from earlier scholarship because Adhikari brings a very different analytical framework to it: genocide. Chapter one provides the historical context in which the Dutch settlement at the Cape began to increase and encroach on hunter-gatherer societies (peoples who had already faced displacement by the Khoikhoi); and together with the two chapters following it, it provides the historical context and discusses the nature of Dutch and British colonial rule and the conflict that arose between the indigenous peoples of the Cape and the settlers. These chapters are the foundation on which the final chapter is laid: chapter four finally gets to the question of whether the extermination of the San was genocide or not.

The destruction of the San and San society has been widely acknowledged in scholarship, literature, as well as in other media. Laurens van der Post's two novels, *A Story Like the Wind* (1972) and *A Far off Place* (1974), as well as the 1956 BBC series *Lost World of the Kalahari*, which was later published as a book under the same title (1958), fixed a particular myth of the San; timeless, unchanging and primordial, connected to the land and nature: 'noble savages'. Popular culture in the form of Jamie Uys' film *The Gods must be Crazy* (1980) and its sequels have not only entrenched this stereotypical myth but also, unintentionally one suspects, represented the depressingly contained world of the San. As the film depicts, the pre-colonial unlimited vistas of the San world are so sharply limited that the end of the earth is reached within a matter of a few days of walking.

More recent documentary films such as the Foster brothers' *The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story* (2000) or *The Bushman's Secret* (Rehad Desai, 2006), among others, continue to represent the San as mystics whose medium is the land and all it nurtures. With breathtaking cinematography, these films invariably begin with

opening sequences of San walking, striding purposefully and confidently, in a desert landscape with unlimited horizons thereby fixing a spiritual union between land and San. *The Great Dance* in particular draws blatantly on van der Post's romanticism with the following voice-over narration in the opening sequences: 'A story is like the wind, it comes floating from a far off place'. This narration is accompanied by a visual sequence of walking San, cut to a praying mantis, back to a San raising a melon to his mouth and cut back to the walking San, seen as though it is a mirage.

What is problematic about these films is not the link between the San and land; after all, land and what it contained was the reason for their victimisation by competitors, whether these were European settlers or fellow African peoples. Rather, what is questionable is the manner in which this union is represented and the contradiction between voice-over narration and visual representation. Desai's film, as the name suggests, is about the Bushman's secret, Hoodia, which is being commercially marketed as an appetite suppressant and weight-loss miracle. The San have had no monetary gain from having their traditional medicinal plant and knowledge exploited for commercial purposes. Desai's narration veers between lamenting the lost world and identity of the San and taking aim at multinationals profiting from San knowledge. The visual representations once again create an unproblematised relationship between San and the land. Loss of identity, culture and way of life, in other words, historical change, are acknowledged in the narration and interviews. Visual representations, however, continue to perpetuate the romantic myth of a timeless people spiritually connected to land, plants and animal life around them.

Adhikari's reframing of the destruction of the San as genocide represents a marked departure from the extant literature and media on the Cape San which has clearly identified destruction, extermination and killing but has stopped short of using the term.[10] Before Adhikari, the framing of these encounters as genocide was simply non-existent in South African historiography.

The Anatomy of a South African Genocide also brings into sharp relief the link between genocide and settler colonialism within a distinctly South African context. The central argument of the book, which is not a lengthy tome but rather an introduction to the subject,

is that Dutch settler society at the Cape became genocidal in its conflict with the San over land and resources. Dutch settlers organised vigilante commandos, sometimes with the complicit support, other times with the implicit knowledge of the Dutch colonial state. They engaged in brutal massacres. This genocidal impulse turned to ethnocide under British colonial rule, as it tried to absorb and assimilate the San into existing colonial society.

Settler colonial studies as an area of scholarship independent of colonial studies is relatively new, and growing. This growth is being aided in no small measure by the concomitant growth in genocide research scholarship. While studies of the genocides of indigenous peoples at the hands of settler colonists abound for areas such as Australia or the United States, in South Africa there has been an absence of similar scholarship and this despite the colonial commonalities South Africa shares with other locales. Adhikari's book, as introductory as it is, attempts to provide a different lens with which to view the conflict and clashes between the Dutch settlers and the San. Hopefully, it will generate some debate and increased critical engagement with the subject.

The point of course is whether one accepts this different lens as valid or not. Genocide as a concept has and continues to create controversy and debate despite the increasing amount of scholarship that is being produced in genocides studies. It is a given that most genocide scholars find the UN Convention definition of genocide problematic. One of the biggest bones of contention is that of victim identification. The UN Convention limits itself to a 'national, ethnical, racial or religious group' and appends to this these two words 'as such'. Excluded from these identified victim groups are political groups, gender groups or sexual groups (for example, the deliberate and brutal killings of African lesbians in South Africa is excluded from its definition).

Despite the proliferation of genocide research, or perhaps because of it, scholars do not agree on how best to work with the UN Convention. A recent debate within the pages of the *Journal of Genocide Research* re-visits what is controversial in the UN Convention.[11] For Armenian scholar Paul Boghossian, a distinct flaw is that the UN Convention fails to fully capture the essence of Lemkin's original term, i.e., genocide as a distinctive crime, namely

the murder of a people. Nor does the UN Convention meet the expectations of setting genocide aside as a particularly 'heinous' crime that can be graded as the worst on a moral barometer of heinousness.[12] Boghossian concludes that the UN definition is 'flawed' and yet he cannot see how it could be improved.[13]

Given these perceived 'flaws' in the UN Convention it is not surprising that a significant amount of genocide studies has focused on defining genocide. An acceptable definition remains elusive as many scholars, like Adhikari for example, adapt the existing definitions to suit the particular case studies they focus on. This process of adapting can be positively dynamic as each adaption adds another dimension and enriches what is already extant. Viewed in this light, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide* is a beginning point for a fresh debate on the history of the destruction of hunter-gatherer societies at the Cape. The process of adapting concepts can, however, also be a counterproductive exercise when scholarship deteriorates to the level of semantic one-upmanship or obfuscates key issues.

Both Boghossian and William Schabas agree that controversy, debate, and 'complication' often 'distract from the main issue'.[14] The main issue is that large numbers of human beings were wilfully destroyed in the past and this has to be recognised while future occurrences must be prevented. Both Schabas and Boghossian make a distinction between the UN Convention, which is a legal text and therefore makes genocide punishable by law, and the concept of genocide. This distinction becomes crucial when there is a case of retroactive identification, as in the case of the Cape San. The UN Convention cannot be applied retroactively, a crime committed centuries before a law was promulgated cannot be punished. The concept of genocide, however, is another matter entirely, and is not subject to the same legal strictures. This distinction is not discussed in any great depth by Adhikari but is manifest in his awareness that there is no possibility of ever punishing the perpetrators of the genocide of the San.[15]

The issue of retroactive application of the concept genocide is a contentious one in pre-1944 case studies such as the extermination of the San or the killings of Armenians in 1915. Adhikari notes that this has been one of several criticisms raised

against applying the term genocide to the destruction of the Cape San.[16] In brief, the argument is that a distinctly twentieth-century term, denoting a twentieth century phenomenon, cannot be applied to events which occurred long before the word was coined and gained popular usage. Critics who argue against a retroactive application of the term genocide invariably draw on the Holocaust as the paradigmatic genocide which spurred Lemkin to coin the term. With the Holocaust in mind, genocide is understood as a state-sponsored, mechanised program of systematic elimination. Adhikari's response to this criticism is succinct and persuasive (and echoes Boghossian's suggestion): we need to separate the legalistic terms of the UN Convention from the concept genocide.[17]

Retroactive identification is one criticism. Other challenges to identifying the extermination of the San as genocide revolve around the question of numbers. How many San were killed, was there intention, how can killings that were spread over almost two centuries and gradual be considered a genocidal event? Adhikari addresses all these challenges rather succinctly, due perhaps to the introductory nature and scope of his book. This is not a major fault; what needed more substantial and explicit discussion, however, is the issue of the politics of silence and genocide denialism.

Robert J. Gordon's study on the 'forgotten' genocide of the Bushman in Namibia raises a similar issue of silence and invisibility.[18] In his case study, the genocide that has claimed the lion's share of attention has been the 1904 genocide of the Herero and Nama, while the destruction of Namibian San has remained obscured and forgotten. Clearly evident in Gordon's article is the link between reparations and silence and/or denialism. For the Herero it appears to be a case of losing a local monopoly on genocide, and resulting reparations paid by the German government.[19] For the Germans, a focus on the war against the Herero overshadows the nature and duration of the killing of Namibian San.

Gordon's case study raises numerous parallels, despite differences in time and place, with the case study of the Cape San. Firstly, at the most obvious level, both societies were settler societies: German and Dutch, and both were intent on establishing and entrenching their respective cultures and rule. Secondly, in both instances, labour and resources were primary motivations for striking

out at the indigenous peoples. Patrick Wolfe's pithy phrase, '[l]and is life', speaks volumes about the nature of clashes between settlers and indigenous peoples.[20] According to Norbert Finzsch, settler 'imperialism' is unashamedly a form of land acquisition 'driven by the war machine of settlers at the fringes of white settlements that is external to the state apparatus'.[21] Settlement is about repeatedly transgressing borders.

> They [settlers] stake, claim, fence, farm and graze, clear trees, are met with resistance from indigenous peoples who attack settlers, kill animals, burn crops, steal, which in turn elicits violent reaction from settlers who form bands of militia or frontier guards and begin exercising vigilante justice.[22]

Both Wolfe and Adhikari acknowledge that though settler colonialism is not inherently genocidal it has a propensity for genocide. Settler colonialism is 'inherently eliminatory': in order to build, to imprint permanence and stake ownership, it has to eliminate all other claimants and it has to destroy what was already in place.[23] This impulse to eliminate in order to acquire is often disguised and clothed in terms of race, or becomes a 'discourse of savagery'.[24] The indigenous people are cast as savages and utterly beyond redemption by European civilisation. As savages, 'vermin' and irredeemable, it was easy to eliminate them entirely. In German South West Africa for example, the San were considered even lower than the Herero or the Nama because they appeared to own no territory, were peripatetic and incapable of working.[25] A similar worldview was operative in the Cape Colony, where San occupied the lowest rung of a social hierarchy, below the Khoikhoi. Thirdly, in both instances, genocide is vehemently denied, although the history of clashes between the Cape San and settlers is better documented than is the case with the Namibian San. Given these similarities, one wonders whether similarity extends to motivations for silence and denial.

In South Africa, legal prosecution is no longer possible, it would seem, given that so much time has elapsed. But, as Adhikari

points out, 'issues of recompense, memorialisation, apology and recognition of past suffering' are pertinent and relevant.[26] And yet, the question of who should bear responsibility remains. Should recompense and apology come from erstwhile metropolitan centres? How much of this recompense and apology should come from a majority black government, especially if one recognises and accepts that the San have been brutalised by European settlers as well as by fellow African groups?

By way of conclusion it would perhaps be instructive to revisit Thabo Mbeki's speech on Freedom Day 2000. The speech gives recognition for past suffering, however inadequate that recognition may be. The new coat of arms and motto are a form of memorialisation. Well, so what? How has this improved contemporary San conditions? It has, in fact, one may argue done the opposite: it contributed to effacing the San from public consciousness, *despite* the looming presence of San cultural symbols on the coat of arms and in the motto. It would be surprising if many South Africans even knew that the coat of arms and motto were drawn from San culture. As Alan Barnard points out, South Africans in any case would not be able to read or pronounce the motto. He concludes that since no South African would be able to read the language or pronounce the motto, the /Xam! language was actually used as an equaliser in the context of South African diversity.[27]

In terms of recompense, the South African government awarded almost sixty-five thousand hectares of land in and around the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park to the ≠Khomani San in 1999. This historic award, coupled with increased awareness of the plight of San communities and San activism should ideally have brought some amelioration. The San, however, continue to remain an exploited underclass: whether they survive as farm labourers, domestic servants, or whether they continue traditional foraging activities they remain dependent on state relief.[28]

The ANC government has been overwhelmingly focused on the historical narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle. The antecedents of apartheid, European imperialism and settler racism were not invited to participate in the parade of *reveal, repent and reconcile* that was so potently embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the lengthy TRC Report, the San appear in a submission by the

'Bushmen Battalion' or Battalion 31, a special tracking unit of !Xu San.[29] This submission comes in the context of SADF activities in neighbouring countries rather than in the context of a dedicated focus on San society itself. In view of this, former president Thabo Mbeki's attempt to recognise and memorialise falls short of what Adhikari may have in mind. It also falls short of what the San have expected since 1994.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Ramose and colleagues from the writing workshop for reading the earliest, roughest draft of this essay. Professors Johannes du Bruyn and Tilman Dedering also read and provided insightful comments and engaging conversation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gairoonisa Paleker is a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research interests are film and history, 'black films' in South Africa and colonial cinemas.

NOTES

[1] Many thanks to Professor Mogobe Ramose for drawing my attention to the coat of arms, thereby getting me to re-think aspects of this article.
[2] For a discussion of the origins of this rock painting see Alan Barnard, 'Coat of Arms and the Body Politic: Khoisan Imagery and South African National Identity', *Ethnos* 69, 1 (2004), pp. 5-22.
[3] President Thabo Mbeki's translation of the motto, cited in Barnard, 'Coat of Arms', p. 10
[4] Quoted in Barnard, 'Coat of Arms', p .6.
[5] Quoted in Barnard, 'Coat of Arms', p. 10.
[6] Mohamed Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2010), p. 12.
[7] Adhikari, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, p. 14.
[8] Shula Marks, 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *The Journal of African History* 13, 1 (1972), pp. 55-80.
[9] See <http://www.san.org.za>. Accessed 6 August, 2011.
[10] Rupert Isaacson has used the word genocide in describing the destruction of South African San. His work, however, lacks the detailed analysis that Adhikari provides. See Rupert Isaacson, 'Last Exit from the Kalahari: The Slow Genocide of the Bushmen/San'. Available at:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ecology-summits/article_267.jsp>. Accessed 10 August 2011.
[11] See *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, 1 (2010).
[12] Paul Boghossian, 'The Concept of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, 1 (2010), p. 74.
[13] Boghossian, 'The Concept of Genocide', p. 73.
[14]William Schabas, 'Commentary on Paul Boghossian, "The Concept of Genocide"', *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, 1 (2010), p. 91.
[15] Adhikari, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, p. 93.
[16] Adhikari, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, p. 90.
[17] Adhikari, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, p. 90.
[18] Robert J. Gordon, 'Hiding in Full View: The "Forgotten" Bushman Genocides of Namibia', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 4, 1 (2009), p. 29-57.
[19] Gordon, 'Hiding in Full View', p. 31.
[20] Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, 4, (2006), p.387.
[21] Norbert Finzsch, '[...] Extirpate or Remove that Vermine": Genocide, Biological Warfare, and Settler Imperialism in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10, 2 (2002), p. 220.
[22] Finzsch, 'Extirpate or Remove', p. 220.
[23] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', p. 387.
[24] Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.
[25] Gordon, 'Hiding in Full View', p. 50.
[26] Adhikari, *Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, p. 93.
[27] Barnard, 'Coat of Arms', p. 19.
[28] For a discussion of San identity and current status, see Renee Sylvain, 'Land, Water and Truth: San Identity and Global Indigenism', *American Anthropologist* 104, 4 (2002), pp. 1074-85.
[29] *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, vol. 2, chapter 1 (1998), pp. 22-23.