



INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES, AND LANGUAGE: (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN KHOISAN IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT. There has been a revival of indigenous Khoisan identities in democratic South Africa, and it arises from the Afrocentric paradigm. Located within Khoisanistics, the study of indigenous Khoisan peoples, their language and culture, this article focuses on the (re)construction of modern Khoisan identities with reference to indigenous rights, indigenous Khoisan epistemologies, and their language. I argue that there is a need for a scholarly exploration of Khoisan identities from a philosophical perspective rooted within indigenous epistemologies, rather than from whitestream research perspectives, which historically ignored and/or marginalized indigenous approaches. I develop my argument, firstly, by locating myself within the research. Secondly, I explore the erosion of indigenous rights of the Khoisan people since the arrival of white settlers at the Cape in 1652, and examine contemporary attempts to restore indigenous rights. Thirdly, I reflect on indigenous Khoisan epistemologies, which are closely related to land, community and leadership, and this paper explores the Khoisan philosophy towards land: the land is not ours, we belong to the land. Finally, I explore Khoisan struggles aimed at the revival of their language.

Keywords: Khoisan; identities; indigenous rights; indigenous epistemologies; language

1. Introduction

This study is located within “Khoisanistics,” which is the study of the indigenous Khoisan peoples of South(ern) Africa, their language and their culture. Since Khoisan people are Africans, I also take a very strong Afrocentric stance. A critical aspect of Afrocentric epistemology is the explicit rejection of Eurocentric intellectual traditions and the deliberate

displacement of criteria and practices that are derived from Eurocentric models. Following from this there have been renewed attempts since 1994 to reflect on a distorted history in South Africa, and to focus on the plight of the indigenous Khoisan people.

Firstly, some brief discussion on the term “Khoisan.” Khoisan (first recorded as “Koisan”) is the name by which the lighter skinned indigenous peoples of Southern Africa, the Khoi (Hottentots) and the San (Bushmen), are known. The name refers to cultural, linguistic and even traditional patterns amongst the people. Khoi (in old Nama orthography), or khoe (in modern Nama orthography), means “person.” The Nama and Korana, the two herding peoples who have survived into the seventeenth century, use the compound Khoekhoen, “People of People,” as their self-appellation (Barnard, 1992: 7). Khoe was first recorded as Quena (the -na is a common-gender plural suffix) by Jan van Riebeeck in January 1653 and is found as a generic term for people in most Khoe languages – i.e. those of the Khoekhoe, the Damara, and certain “central Bushman” groups. In Nama the term requires a number-gender suffix (khoeb, a man; khoees, a woman; khoera, two women; khoeti, three or more women, etc.). The term Khoisan has been widely accepted amongst the indigenous people over the last few decades and the different groupings embrace the term as they seek to restore their traditions and culture.

The use of the term “Khoikhoi,” meaning “men of men” or “people,” actually came to prominence in opposition to the offensive label of “Hottentot” applied to herding communities by white colonialists. “San” as a term came to be used to denote the hunter-gathering communities who did not speak Khoi languages – known to white settlers as “Bushmen” – in contradistinction to the Khoi-speaking herders. Traditionally, the Khoi Khoi were largely pastoralists, whilst the San lived primarily from hunter-gathering, and hence the differences in their livelihoods, culture, languages and identity make for some significant distinctions between the Khoi and San peoples, despite their having some common ancestry and cultural commonalities. Increasingly, some San communities, claiming the ultra-marginalization of their people, even in comparison to the Khoi Khoi, are beginning to assert a distinct identity, encouraging the use of “Khoi and San” as opposed to “Khoisan” or “Khoi-San” in official references to these populations. Officially, however, the “Khoisan” as an ethno-linguistic group remain a recognized identity. Notably, there now is wide acceptance of the collective name “Khoisan” within the ranks of the indigenous group.

2. Locating Myself Within the Research

I develop my argument by firstly locating myself with the research. I was born into the Griqua tribe of the Khoisan people and grew up on the ancestral lands of my people in the Northern Cape Province in South Africa, where I was exposed to numerous cultural practices as a child. However, I only developed a deeper and critical understanding of such in my teenage years. As I developed as a researcher I started to immerse myself much more in discourses pertaining to the Khoisan people. In this article I therefore position myself as more than a Khoisan researcher, as I speak from the inside. As an insider I bring with me deep knowledge acquired through the oral tradition and my subsequent research. As opposed to many researchers on Khoisan discourses, I live and practice Khoisan traditions, instead of just doing research from the outside.

3. The Erosion of Indigenous Rights

Many indigenous researchers across the world observe that the erosion of kinship and identity only commenced with the arrival of the Europeans. They further observe that European settlers eradicated and replaced the original values and authority within Aboriginal communities with their own. This is also the case in South Africa. In this section I attempt to explore the erosion of the indigenous rights of the Khoisan people since the arrival of white settlers at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, and examine contemporary attempts to restore these indigenous rights. From a position of historical consciousness I critically reflect on historical markers. For instance, there are European maps that largely ignore the presence of Khoisan tribes, as if these tribes did not exist. Further, some Western maps assigned fixed positions to Khoi dwellings and kraals, completely ignoring the cultural specificity of these tribal people, who were nomadic hunter-gatherers.

The arrival of the Dutch settlers under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck in Table Bay, at what was to become Cape Town, on 6 April 1652 brought them into contact and conflict with the Khoisan people, who resided in this part of the country. Both the hunter-gatherer San and the pastoralist Khoi Khoi are estimated to have been living in parts of southern Africa for at least two thousand years. As a result of the establishment and growth of colonial settlements over the ensuing two and a half centuries, the Khoisan people lost many of their claims to land, land which largely has not been restored to them. The question arises: why were the Khoisan people so brutalized and dispossessed of their ancestral lands by the Dutch and British colonizers? Charles W. Mills offers some explanation for the treatment the Khoisan people endured, first under colonial rule (by the British and later the Dutch),

and later by the Afrikaner settlers under apartheid. Mills (1997: 31) discusses what he calls “The Racial Contract,” and concludes that the modern world was created expressly as a racially hierarchical polity, globally dominated by Europeans. He (Mills, 1997: 28) remarks that the white settler states (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Zimbabwe and South Africa) were all founded on similar policies: the extermination, displacement and/or herding onto reservations of the aboriginal population. For Mills, the racial contract is an exploitation contract that creates global European economic domination and national white racial privilege. Thus, the arrival of the colonizers in South Africa was geared towards the oppression that the Khoisan people have endured since 1652.

The arrival of the Dutch, and their racial and economic oppression of the indigenous population, led to the Dutch-Khoikhoi wars. The First Khoikhoi-Dutch War, in 1659, became the first of a series of armed confrontations over the ownership of land and took place between the Dutch settlers and a Khoikhoi clan led by Doman. The dispute was over cattle. In this first anti-colonial Khoikhoi-Dutch War, the settlers sought refuge in the fort they had built. The Dutch then erected a series of fortified fences along the Liesbeeck River, and an almond hedge in the present-day Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, to separate the Khoikhoi from their ancestral land and from the Dutch. The Khoikhoi thus were restricted in their movement and were forced to use designated gates when entering the enclosed and fortified areas.

The Second Khoikhoi-Dutch War, in 1673, arose after exploratory excursions by the Dutch into the interior north of the colony revealed fertile grazing land to the northeast of the Hottentots-Hollands Mountains that belonged to the Chainoqua, Hessequa, Cochoqua and Gouriqua Khoikhoi chiefdoms. These Khoikhoi tribes had large herds of livestock and were willing to engage in trade with the Dutch. However, the Dutch terms of trade resulted in warfare and the raiding of livestock, also between the Khoikhoi chiefdoms. In 1673, the Dutch East India Company sent Hieronimus Cruse to attack the Cochoqua. The attack was executed on horseback and marked the beginning of the Second Dutch-Khoikhoi War. The Dutch took approximately 1 800 head of livestock.

The Third Khoikhoi-Dutch War happened in 1674, only 22 years after the arrival of the Dutch colonizers. The Dutch East India Company launched a second follow-up attack on the Chocoqua. In that Third Dutch-Khoikhoi War, almost 5 000 head of livestock, in addition to weapons, were taken from the Chocoqua. The war continued until 1677, when Governor Bax extracted the submission of the Chocoqua to Dutch rule that was expressed in an annual tribute of thirty head of cattle. That submission paved the way for Dutch colonial expansion into the land of the Khoikhoi.

Some modern scholars have observed that superior war-making ability was not the only means by which the Dutch forced the Khoikhoi to submit. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European settlers ousted the Khoikhoi and San from much of the land they inhabited in south-western Africa using a strategic combination of technology and bureaucracy. The settlers possessed a powerful new fighting technology in the form of firearms and horses, which enabled them to hold and defend lands taken from the Khoikhoi. The Dutch East India Company legitimized the settler occupation of Khoikhoi land by granting them exclusive use of lands they acquired in freehold or on loan. The settlers took advantage of this permissive policy and their connection to the Cape Town bureaucracy to acquire choice watered land in the interior. These lands, and the water sources and pastures they contained, were denied to the Khoikhoi pastoralists, who found it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves in a land in which access to limited water resources was necessary for survival. In a slow, non-catastrophic process the Khoikhoi gradually were squeezed from the lands they had once occupied as European settlers alienated the springs and permanent water courses. The survivors of this process often became clients of European settlers and applied their skills in animal husbandry to the invaders' livestock instead of their own.

Contact with Europeans also exposed the Khoisan people to white people's diseases. Thus, Khoisan communities underwent a sharp decline in population with the arrival of European settlers, largely due to warfare and diseases such as smallpox. The Khoisan had no natural immunity to the imported diseases, and were hit hard by epidemics. In 1713, for example, an estimated 90 percent of the Khoisan population is thought to have been wiped out by smallpox. Moreover, the traditional lifestyles and cultures of distinct communities often were altered by intermarriage with different ethnic groups, especially in the Western Cape. There is evidence of intermarriage both between the Khoikhoi and San populations and colonial slave populations, and Bantu-speaking farmers and white settlers. This created a degree of fluidity in Khoisan identity, in terms of both economic activity and language. Through such intermarriage and assimilation, the Khoisan populations were exposed to languages not only from Europe and other parts of southern Africa, but also from South East Asia as a result of the huge presence of slaves from Dutch colonies such as Malaysia. The connection of the Khoisan with a slave heritage is significant in contemporary understandings of Khoisan identity, with various Khoi leaders today asserting their heritage from and links to Cape slavery.

Since 1994, some Khoisan groups prefer no longer to be classified as "colored" (South African spelling: coloured) as per the apartheid system, and increasingly have demanded recognition as a distinct group with its own identity. There is an increased desire on the part of Khoisan communities for

colored rejectionism and the reaffirmation of an indigenous heritage, which entail geographic rootedness, a sense of belonging, entitlement and ownership, in addition to unity and legitimacy as an ethno-national group.

4. Khoisan Epistemologies

Whitestream researchers often have diminished indigenous (such as Khoisan) philosophies by referring to them as “worldviews,” in contrast to designations such as “ontologies” and “epistemologies” that frequently are used to describe Western thought. This article treats indigenous philosophies as “ways of knowing,” “ways of being,” “indigenous knowledges,” “worldview” and “epistemologies.” Scholars who recognize the validity of indigenous philosophies, and the prejudice that whitestream research creates through reductive terminology, refer to both Indigenous and Western philosophies in terms of ontologies and epistemologies (see Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 2004). Khoisan epistemologies are closely related to land, language, and leadership, and this paper explores the Khoisan philosophy towards land: the land is not ours, we belong to the land.

Low (2004: 14) suggests that Khoisan attitudes towards the unknown and ignorance are built upon possibility and experience. Relative to Western behavior, the Khoisan outlook rests upon a different status accorded to knowledge. In a Khoisan context, “traditional society” knowledge has “no diplomatic immunity,” and points not to an indifference to truth or lack of ability to recognize it, but to a culturally mediated personal access to truth that is not contradicted by the personal access of others. Low concludes that there is an underlying consistency in Khoisan ontology, epistemology and cosmology that generates consistency in their healing strategies. I agree with Low (who is not Khoisan and thus an outsider) that most Khoisan people accord validity to knowledge handed down from “the old people,” and acquired through dreaming, trancing, divination, “presentiments” and, more ambiguously, from stories. It is a sort of knowledge not validated by scientific orthodoxy, despite the similarities with widespread historical patterns of thought.

4.1 The land

The Khoisan philosophy towards land is: the land is not ours, we belong to the land. This philosophy stems from the fact that early Khoisan people were hunter-gatherers with a nomadic lifestyle. As a result, Khoisan people lived largely off game, honey and the roots and fruits of plants. They lived – and some still do today – in total harmony with nature, posing no threat to wildlife and vegetation by over-hunting or gathering. The semi-nomadic

existence of the San was (and is) governed by the seasons and the movement of game. Thus, Khoisan ways of life were built on a strong sense of community. In such a community, the well-being of the community came first, as opposed to that of the individual. Since the community was dependent on natural resources, there were no permanent towns or places of living (Van Wyk, 2014). The land thus provided Khoisan people with shelter and food. When food sources became scarce, the entire community moved to areas where they could find more resources. This nomadic lifestyle resulted in parts of the land being uninhabited for periods of time, and also no formal or Western style of ownership of land. Colonialists exploited this indigenous approach to land and legally claimed Khoisan ancestral lands for themselves and, in the process, prevented access to land.

The issue of land restitution and traditional land claims has become of crucial importance in the post-apartheid era as the Khoisan affirmation of identity has become stronger. Under the Land Restitution Act of 1994, persons or communities who lost their property as a result of apartheid laws or practices after 1913 were invited to submit claims for restitution or compensation. The Land Act of 1913 had formalized the land dispossession of black South Africans and limited African land ownership to “native reserves.” However, this Land Act had little practical effect on the Khoisan populations, whose land had largely been confiscated earlier in the colonial period, from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Therefore, since the 1994 Land Restitution Act excludes land dispossession prior to 1913, any Khoisan claims to the land that was confiscated from them prior to this point have not been taken in hand. Such loss of land is hugely significant in any consideration of the contemporary identity of a group with strong ties to land as part of their traditional way of life, and therefore continued displacement from traditional land cannot help but have an impact on Khoisan identity. This is a major concern of many contemporary Khoisan leaders, and a case for the recognition of Khoisan land claims was in fact brought to the government in Pretoria in February 2012. The struggle for Khoisan ancestral lands continues in 2015.

4.2 Leadership

An important aspect of the Khoisan assertion of identity in the post-apartheid period is that of political participation and civic organizations. Members of the Khoisan community have been active in stating their claims to the South African government, for example with the 2010 lawsuit, and the current demands for the restitution of land rights (Mitchell, undated). Whilst individuals from Khoisan – or earlier, colored – backgrounds have long been involved in general political organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) or the South African National Civic Organization (Sanco),

the recent land restitution claims have seen the involvement of broader organizations, such as the South African Progressive Civic Organization and the AfriYouth Forum, in strictly Khoisan affairs, demonstrating the extent to which Khoisan identity is becoming more widely viewed as significant within South Africa.

Under the apartheid government, Khoisan peoples were forced to register as “colored”, a label that later came to be widely resented, especially from the 1980s, for its neglect of their distinct identity. However, the issue of colored registration and identity is a complex one. Within the colored category there existed various subgroups, including Cape colored, Cape Malay, Griqua, Nama, and “other colored.” The Khoisan community was not neatly categorized within any one of these groups, but instead individuals with slightly different heritages were categorized as belonging to different subgroups. Those of Khoikhoi and Afrikaner descent, for example, often classified themselves as Griqua, whilst those with a stronger slave heritage tended to be classified as Cape Malays. Such policies of classification or self-classification, along with the land dispossession that came as a result of forced relocation policies, resulted in a Khoisan identity that was fractured further in its lack of official recognition.

In one sense, the colored category allowed the Khoisan socio-political and economic privileges denied to the black population, such as not being required to carry a pass book. Nevertheless, so-called coloreds remained subject to harsh discrimination, including the segregation of amenities such as schools and restaurants, and the forcible relocation of over half a million colored people under the Group Areas Act of 1950. In this process, property owners were meagerly compensated, and long-standing communities found themselves broken up, contributing to a further fracturing of Khoisan identities. In addition to this, coloreds were removed from the common voters’ roll in 1956. They were placed on a separate voters’ roll, which would permit them to elect four white people to represent them in the House of Assembly, an activity that was seen as pointless by many members of the colored community. As a result, their political participation declined, with only 50.2% of coloreds voting in the next election, and many refusing to register for the new voters’ roll.

In the 1970s and 1980s, various members of the Khoisan community accepted positions as trackers for European hunting companies, and a significant number were employed by the South African Defence Force (SADF) to track guerrilla fighters during the anti-apartheid struggle. In their employment by the SADF, various cultural and racial stereotypes regarding the Khoisan came to the fore. Khoisan trackers were employed based on stereotypical perceptions of them as expert trackers, and were instrumental in the SADF’s pursuit of the African National Congress (ANC) and South West Africa People’s Organisation (Swapo). Consequently, some Khoisan

communities have been subject to retaliatory attacks from other members of society, as the stereotypical image of the Khoisan tracker working for the apartheid government has proved enduring.

Since 1994, the Khoisan are no longer classified as “colored” as per the apartheid system, but the democratic government has retained the old apartheid racial categories (colored, African, Indian and white). The reason for this is to assist with the equity and redress imperatives of the new era. In the midst of these developments, the Khoisan people have increasingly demanded recognition as a distinct group with its own identity (Mitchell, undated). There is an increased desire on the part of Khoisan communities for colored rejectionism and the reaffirmation of an indigenous heritage that entails geographic rootedness and a sense of belonging, entitlement and ownership, in addition to unity and legitimacy as an ethno-national group. This has culminated in legal proceedings, such as the case of “cultural genocide and discrimination against the Khoisan nation” that was brought to the Equality Court in 2010. In this case, leaders were opposed particularly to the use of the term “colored” with reference to the Khoisan peoples, asserting the use of the classification to keep the Khoisan population in bondage. Their demands included government recognition not only of their leadership, but also of eighteen clans, including the Namaqua, Griqua and Hassequa. Furthermore, demands have been made to the government in Pretoria, both for their recognition as South Africa’s first and original inhabitants, and for land rights historically denied to them. These demands were handed to Phumzile Simelela, Chief Director in the Office of the Director General, and center on land reform discussions aimed at the legitimization of land claims prior to the 1913 Native Land Act (Mitchell, undated).

Another concern of many contemporary Khoisan is the return to their native territories of the remains of their ancestors that were taken to Europe in the colonial period. In 2002, for example, the remains of Sarah Baartman, often known under the derogatory name of “The Hottentot Venus,” were returned to South Africa from a French museum. She had been transported from South Africa to Europe in 1810 as a living exhibition of a supposedly primitive African physiology and, after her death, her remains had been kept in Paris’s Musee de l’Homme, where they were displayed until 1974. After an extensive campaign, her remains were finally returned to South Africa in 2002 and properly buried, marking a significant, albeit poignant, victory for the Khoisan. However, the lack of return of the remains of various other Khoisan individuals continues to be a significant concern.

In South Africa, the government officially recognizes the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) as a body of traditional or “tribal” leaders, but there is some controversy regarding Khoisan membership of this. Some chiefs, including Chief Hennie van Wyk, refuse to

be part of this organization, as they consider themselves indigenous, rather than traditional, leaders. The wider Khoisan community, on the other hand, has developed the National Khoisan Consultative Conference as a tribal representative body, which was established in 2001. The Conference consists of a group of 20 representatives from different Khoisan communities, representing ten different religions, and acts as an umbrella body for Khoisan peoples across South Africa.

There have been some controversies relating to this organization, especially from San leaders who were concerned about the possible dilution of explicitly San identity within this combined structure. Nevertheless, the very existence of the Conference is significant in the way in which it demonstrates the growing assertion of Khoisan identity in the post-apartheid period. At the opening ceremony of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference in March 2001, then-Deputy President Jacob Zuma declared it a “defining moment in the history of our country in general, and that of the Khoisan people in particular – the first indigenous people of our country.” He expanded to explain that (Office of the Presidency, 2001):

This conference is also a powerful demonstration of the enduring strength of the Khoisan people. It was, after all, the Khoi-Khoi in the Cape who waged the first wars of resistance against the colonial onslaught of the seventeenth Century. It is of historical significance that the descendants of those who were cruelly victimised, repressed, exploited, driven from their homes and suffered worse injustices and inhuman treatment, are today joining together to participate in building a better and stronger South African nation.

The key aims of this Council, according to chairperson Cecil le Fleur, are to center on raising awareness of the Khoisan heritage, rendering the pursuit and preservation of their culture more significant than traditional political campaigning. Indeed, his comments appear apt for the position of Khoisan identity, and its assertion in contemporary South Africa more generally, not merely within the Council. He says (Garman, 2001):

We need to re-introduce the pride of who we are. We want to penetrate the coloured community. There’s so much gangsterism because people want to belong. They want to fit in and be part of something. They call themselves ‘Coloured’ but they don’t know where they originate. The Western lifestyle was pushed on them throughout the colonial period. They can’t see how important it is to see their roots. We need to unite our people. We need to show them where they belong.

5. Language

There are further questions pertaining to Khoisan identity within post-apartheid South Africa that continue to be topics of debate, especially among Khoisan leaders. A central facet of these concerns regards the use of Khoisan languages. Of South Africa's eleven official languages (which include English, Afrikaans and nine Bantu languages), not one is a Khoisan language. Interestingly, however, the South African coat of arms features a phrase in Xam, a now-frozen Khoisan language (that is to say, it exists in written form, but no living speakers remain), potentially implying the growing perception of the importance of Khoisan history and culture in the greater South African identity.

The populations who speak these indigenous languages are generally rather small, due to the "language death" as a result of the Khoisan people's displacement from their traditional lands and related economic practices over the course of the colonial and apartheid eras. Indeed, many Khoisan adopted Afrikaans during these periods, especially in the Western Cape, where Afrikaans is a dominant language. As a result, many of their indigenous languages are now either endangered or extinct, and most have no written record. Many Khoisan leaders today, including Hennie van Wyk, speak Afrikaans and English, but have only limited knowledge of the indigenous languages of their people. This tendency extends even to the names of many Khoisan individuals, who have Dutch or Afrikaner names dating back to the colonial period. Many members of Khoisan communities were either given names by the colonial administrators, who were unable to pronounce their names in the Khoi or San languages, or adopted these names over time due to the impact of colonial rule and religious conversion.

Despite such influences and the decline in Khoisan languages since the advent of colonialism, these languages are not entirely extinct, and they continue to form an important aspect of Khoisan identity. There remain several thousand Nama speakers in the Namaqualand area and along the Orange River, and approximately a thousand Khoedam speakers currently live in Schmidtsdrift, near Kimberley. In addition, there remain approximately a quarter of a million KhoeKhoe speakers in southern Africa, although these individuals live primarily in Namibia. When the Khoisan people were driven off their ancestral lands in the Northern Cape area of the Richtersveld (during apartheid) they were dumped in parts of the Eastern Cape, where they were assimilated into Xhosa culture. Many of the people opted instead to flee across the border to Namibia, where they had the freedom to speak their own language.

Whilst they have never been recognized as official languages, the indigenous Khoi and San languages are constitutionally recognized. The current constitution recognizes the historically diminished use and status the

indigenous languages of our people, [and that] the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages. Indeed, whilst no Khoi or San language has previously been taught formally in South African schools, recent developments show some schools beginning to revive their use, and new books in these vernaculars are being created. Moreover, in Schmidtsdrift there is a Khoisan radio station, XK-FM, with an estimated 5 000 listeners, most in the Northern Cape. Programs are broadcast in the !Xhu and Khwe languages, covering news, current affairs, story-telling, education, drama and music. Furthermore, the Pan South African Language Board currently claims to promote the development and use of the Khoi, Nama and San languages. However, there is no legal obligation for the state to provide services in these languages, potentially undermining the government's aim to advance their use and status, and having a detrimental effect on Khoisan identity.

Under colonial rule the Khoisan languages were prohibited or suppressed. This was devastating to the oral tradition, according to which cultural knowledge is passed on from generation to generation through practices, stories and the narration of important events. Sadly, with the loss of language there also was a loss of knowledge cultures. The importance of language to people's identity cannot be overemphasized. The Khoisan language, Khoi Khoi Gowab, is still being spoken by most San and Nama peoples; hence the Khoi Khoi Gowab language is known today as the Nama language. Colonization affected the Khoisan people worse than any other national group, since all other South African groupings today still speak their own language, e.g. Pedi, Xhosa, Zulu, etc. They were not forced to speak the language of the colonizer as the Khoisan people were. Hence, if one of these groups today say they cannot speak their own language, it is by their own choice, unlike the Khoisan, who like many other indigenous people all over the world, were forced to take on the language of the colonizer.

6. Concluding Remarks

Finally, such is the national debate on the indigenous Khoisan people that the current President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, referred to it in his State of the Nation Address on 9 February 2012 (The Presidency, 2012: 7). He stated:

It is important to remember that the Khoi-San people were the most brutalised by colonialists who tried to make them extinct, and undermined their language and identity. As a free and democratic South Africa today, we cannot ignore to correct the past.

Democratic South Africa has opened up spaces for the renewed formation of identity of the minority Khoisan people. At the same time it also has exposed deep cultural and political divisions with other black groups in the country. For instance, a recent claim for compensation by Khoisan soldiers who fought in the Second World War was rejected on the basis that the Khoisan soldiers fought on the side of apartheid. This verdict conveniently overlooked the fact that apartheid started in 1948, and the Second World War ended in 1945. Notably, South Africa was part of the Commonwealth and fought under the British flag in the Second World War. Despite the enormous contributions of the Khoisan people to the struggle for democracy, the indigenous people remain underrepresented in many government and political formations. Since 1994, many black people have benefited from change, but the Khoisan people remain economically marginalized. This is because the government fears that an official restoration of the First Nation status of the Khoisan people will push other groups out. However, the claim of the Khoisan people to their indigenous rights is undeniable. Crucial here is the revival of the Khoi Khoi Gowab language, as it provides a new avenue for (re)constructing modern Khoisan identities.

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