

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 7 No. 1, April 2023

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-7-issue-1-april-2023/>

Rafael Verbuyst and Ghent University, *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town*. Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2022, pp. 420. ISBN 10: 9004516603 ISBN 13: 978-9004516601.

Reviewed by: Connie Rapoo, University of Botswana.

Rafael Verbuyst's *Khoisan Consciousness* is an ethnographic exploration of the identity deconstruction of the descendants of the Khoikhoi and San people of Post-Apartheid South Africa. Verbuyst forecasts the theme of Khoisan revivalism in both the foreword and the preface through an extract of a poem on the same subject by Zenzile Khoisan, a critical figure in the revivalist movement in South Africa.

Khoisan Consciousness has seven chapters, an introduction, a concluding chapter, and a stunning, extensive bibliography spanning works from across the globe. Taking an ethnographic lens, Verbuyst raises critical questions, including how and why Khoisan revivalists engage with the past, the answers to which offer a unifying thread to the text. The monograph's introduction provides the theoretical underpinnings of the work, drawing attention to current and recurrent debates about the notions of indigenous, indigeneity, autochthony, and revivalism while echoing debates from Steven Robins, Siv Øvernes, Adam Kuper, and other scholars who have contributed significantly to the literature on indigeneity and Khoisan studies. Verbuyst's engagement with these intellectuals and theorists such as Stuart Hall and James Clifford informs his conceptualization of Khoisan revivalism and identification through an emic approach, which he sees as "unfolding in both political and existential contexts." His theorizing of "Khoisan revivalist articulations of indigeneity" emanate from adopting emic perspectives, thereby pointing the reader to a fresh approach to understanding indigeneity.

Chapter 1, "Defining a Phenomenon, Navigating a Field" extends Verbuyst's methodology and theoretical framework. The chapter underscores the importance of fieldwork and explains why ethnography was the process of data collection. The bulk of this chapter outlines the well-known methodological challenges of fieldwork, data collection, and researcher positionality. It also explains Verbuyst's biases, including his choice to use "intellectuals or political

leaders who were explicitly and visibly promoting Khoisan revivalism”—essentially “overtly political Khoisan revivalists” at the exclusion of other social actors—to argue for generalized insights into Khoisan revivalism. Regrettably, the book excludes a discussion of the role of social media, a critical platform for the self-identificatory expressions of Khoisan revivalism and the ubiquitous performative activism of contemporary indigenous communities and nations.

Chapter 2, “(Re)Thinking the Khoisan,” contextualizes the historical roots and political aspirations of “*Khoisan revivalism*”. Chapter 2, specifically, refines this term and underscores the underpinnings of resurgence and resilience in the revivalist enactments of Khoisan revivalists. Verbuyst starts the chapter with a discussion of Pippa Skotnes’ exhibition “Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen.” The discussion sets the tone for the chapter, specifically the debates and controversies around Khoisan representation. It is an engaging chapter that also points to the historical trajectory of what Verbuyst terms ‘post-apartheid Khoisan revivalism,’ underscoring acts of agency and self-assertion by the Khoisan. Through a generous list of sources, the history of European invasion and colonization—and the resultant subjugation, dispossession, and gross atrocities—is retold succinctly in an accessible, albeit palatable sanitized tone. Nonetheless, this chapter provides an engaging, expository account of the context from which Khoisan revivalism sprung.

In Chapter 3, Verbuyst revisits and elaborates on his examination of the trajectory of Khoisan revivalism. Paying particular attention to the complexity of Khoisan representation in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, this chapter points out the tensions within and between the Khoisan and the “Coloured” ethnic groups, the political context within which they operate, and their critical calls for reparations and restitutions. Verbuyst writes convincingly about the politicization of Khoisan identity and uses the case of the repatriation of Sarah Baartman as a classic act of ethnic reclamation. The chapter thus engages well with Khoisan revivalists’ assertive articulations of Khoisan indigeneity and affirmations of ethnic distinctiveness and political agency.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 which make up Part 2 of the monograph extend Verbuyst’s argument about reclaiming history, with an emphasis on the interplay of recuperations of the past, healing encounters, and reasserting Khoisan identity. These chapters examine empirical data on the diverse articulations of indigeneity by Khoisan revivalists. Most importantly, they corroborate the author’s notion and arguments about Khoisan identity extinction discourse, underscoring the revivalists’ determinations of their indigeneity. A reading of the echoing of the past, these three chapters are more descriptive than analytical, but do offer insight into issues about identity crisis. The use of Zenzile Khoisan, Chantal Revel, and

Yvette Abrahams to demonstrate the experience of identity crisis is particularly instructive. These revivalists, as the chapters contend, embody expressive Khoisan revivalism and demonstrate how the past gets recalled to interrogate present contingencies. The discussion about debates and fictionalized recuperations of the historical figure of Krotoa compellingly illustrate recuperative aspects of Khoisan revivalism.

Chapter 7, “Khoisan Revivalism and the Therapeutics of Emic History,” is the sole chapter in Part 3 of the monograph. Retracing the trajectory of Khoisan revivalism and enactments of identity reconstruction, the discussion here centres on the notion of authenticity and the Khoisan revivalists’ recuperative and/or restorative practices interrogated in previous chapters. The author contends that heritage has therapeutic qualities and uses pertinent case studies to illustrate this assertion. Interconnectivities between notions of therapeutic history, emic perspectives, and Khoisan revivalism are fruitfully interrogated. This theme is continued in the concluding chapter, which alludes to a “post-transitional South Africa.” Khoisan Consciousness’ conclusion summarily revisits the core arguments and points to possible future research in the space of Khoisan indigenous revivalism and emic histories.

This work covers an extensive research landscape, incorporating the contribution of scholars who identify as Khoisan while highlighting their contribution to debates on Khoisan revivalism and the shift from identity to identification that their contribution engenders. With the acts of identity reclamation—specifically Khoisan ethnic self-assertion—reverberating in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, this monograph is timely and pertinent. It will appeal to academics and students of history, heritage studies, ethnicity and/or subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory. *Khoisan Conscious* is a particularly invaluable resource for San studies and explorations of the notion of indigeneity. It will be of interest to researchers working in the space of race and ethnic identification, memory and memorialization, and emic historicization.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2023 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA’s Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990