‘They say a Dog wears a Ticket’ – Legal Classification instead of Self-Identification

P.A. Erasmus & B.J.H. de Graaff

1 Department of Anthropology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa, P.O. Box 12597, Brandhof, 9324, South Africa
2 Lansbergen Street 10, 4336 DA Middelburg, The Netherlands
*Corresponding author: piet4erasmus@gmail.com

Abstract
The construct of presumed differences and the classification of people into different race groups according to it, were the core business of the apartheid state in South Africa. The Population Registration Act 1950 (Act 30 of 1950) was the instrument primarily responsible for labelling the population. People of Khoe-San extraction had a strange and usually unacceptable identity of ‘Coloured person’ assigned to them in a quite inhuman and hegemonic manner. In this article we use interviews conducted with informants as a basis for looking at individuals’ experience of this process and what outcome it had for their own self-assumed identities.

Keywords: Khoe-San; assumed vs assigned identity; ethnic labels; experience

INTRODUCTION

‘A dog wears a ticket.’ This was the answer someone from the town of Welkom, Free State, received in 1961 when he enquired from the official why he had to register for a dompas (literally: a ‘dumb pass’), in which he was classified as a Coloured, meaning someone who was not a White person or a Bantu.

During 2005 the Unit for Khoe-San Studies, Department of Anthropology, University of the Free State, South Africa, started a research project titled ‘Khoe-San Culture and Memory Project’. Its basic objective was to identify speakers of Khoe or San languages so that the Khoe and San language heritage could be preserved and fostered. In this regard, Grenoble and Whaley (1999) and Van Rensburg (2013) point out that, within fifty years after the arrival of the first White settlers in 1652, the Western Cape Khoe-Khoekhoe language had begun to disappear, being gradually replaced as first language of the Khoe-Khoekhoe by Dutch or ‘Khoi-Afrikaans’. Dealing with the same issue, Schapera (1965) reports that in the 1930s ‘a few of the older Khoe-San people still [knew] their own language, but the great majority now speak only Afrikaans, which is the regular medium of intercourse even among themselves’. According to a 1999 survey there were still some 6 000 Khoe-Khoehogowap (Nama) speakers in South Africa, while the number of people able to speak (some) Xiri (Griqua), !Ora (Korana), or /Nu (≠Khomani) was less than thirty (Killian 2009).

Apart from the project’s focus on the informants’ command of language, information was also gathered about issues related to their identities. The reason behind this was that the Population Registration Act, 1950 (Act 30 of 1950) took away the right to self-identification of certain parts of the South African population, including the Khoe-San. The Act required all South Africans to be identified and registered from birth as one of, originally, three distinct racial groups: White, Bantu and Coloured1. Those who were not White or Bantu were regarded as Coloured2, the umbrella concept for the ‘residue’ – those who did not fit in anywhere else. The Khoe-San were classified as ‘Coloureds’ and were politically, socially and economically constrained to renounce their origins as Griqua, Korana, Nama or San (Cultural Survival 2007; Jung 2000). In this regard, Lee (2003) estimates: ‘Up to 2.5 million Coloured South Africans would identify themselves as Khoi or San, but until recently the opportunity for these peoples to explore their roots has

1 Under the Act as amended in 1962, Indians (i.e. South Asians from the former British India and their descendants) were included and various subgroups were identified: Cape Coloured, Malay, Griqua, Chinese, Indian, Other Asian and Other Coloured.
2 According to Erasmus and Pieterse (1999), the notion of being ‘coloured’ had originated among freed slaves and their descendants between 1875 and 1910. In Jung’s (2000) view, the process started much earlier, as the social and political identities that had been created during the era of slavery were responsible for the development of coloured identities. Although the term was thus used long before the apartheid era, its meaning was more fluid in the nineteenth century (Lewis 1987).
been compromised and thwarted by the distortions of Apartheid.’ Lee’s estimate was confirmed by Quintana-Murci et al. (2010), whose research showed a ‘massive maternal contribution’ (more than 60%) of Khoe-San people to the gene pool of the present South African Coloured population. The first and only time, however, that an effort was made to differentiate the different elements among the Coloured population, and therefore to give these individuals the opportunity to identify themselves, was twelve years before the first apartheid government took office, during the census of 1936 (Christopher 2006).

This study looks at the Khoe-San’s experience of being assigned by the government an identity which, in most cases, did not correspond to their own way of self-assignment. Some of the most important issues that will be dealt with in this article are ethnic labels and ethnic classification and how people coped with these labels. Although the emphasis in this regard is placed on the implementation of the Population Registration Act, 1950, it must be stated that the creation of asymmetrical race categories by the authorities, forcing people to place themselves in a category not necessarily representing their personal choice, was already in force during the colonial period, which lasted until 1910. It was therefore nothing new for the South African population.

The current government is still being confronted by the legacy of the apartheid era’s race categories which often causes considerable confusion. For example, in both the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act 55 of 1998) and the Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003 (Act 53 of 2003) the term ‘Black People’ includes Africans, Coloureds and Indians. On the other hand, the 1996 census referred to ‘Africans/Blacks’, while in the 2001 census this was changed to ‘Black Africans’. An informant told us:

*I could not understand, it’s a thing for me... still a bitter pill. Because all of a sudden the voting polls we are all black. Shortly after that, then you discover that you are a brownman. I have now, one day I had to fill in forms here, then I saw that there, there still are Asian, Coloured. You know, and so, so, so, why is it still like that?*

An idiographic research strategy has been followed. In other words the research was conducted in terms of a qualitative research paradigm. During 2007 interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview schedule with 23 informants of Khoe-San extraction who had formerly been classified as Coloured people and had some knowledge of a Khoe-San language, or knew a relative who could speak the language. The interviews were transcribed and it is that information which is being interpreted and presented here. The informants lived in various places in the Free State, Northern Cape and North West provinces. Twelve of them were female and their ages ranged from 41 to 78 years, with the average age being 62. Most of them had received none, or only a very limited, school education. Afrikaans was the home language of all the informants, while some of the informants’ parents could speak a Khoe or a San language. However, because they had had hardly any opportunities to use or develop such language skills, none of the informants was able to communicate in a Khoe or a San language. Some knew a few words, but no more. It was decided to structure the qualitative data on the basis of the most salient trends that had come to the fore in the interviews.

When a study on cultural and political views among people of Nama, Korana and Griqua descent was carried out eight years later, the results were remarkably similar to those found in 2007. For this second study, information was gathered by interviewing 25 people in the Free State and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa and in the ǁKaras Region of Namibia. Ten of them were female and their ages ranged from 36 to 87 years, with the average age being approximately 61 (not all of the respondents knew their year of birth). With the exception of the Nama in Namibia, none of them could speak more than a couple of words of their ‘old language’, i.e. Xiri or !Ora. The findings of the second study are included in this article. To distinguish between findings of the first and second studies, quotes recorded in 2015 are marked with an asterisk.

**WHO ARE THE KHOE-SAN PEOPLE?**

There are various theories concerning the origin of the Khoe-San (Boonzaier et al. 1996)—even a shipwreck theory which postulates that the Khoe-San were originally the descendants of the survivors of a shipwreck. It is argued that only the little children could escape through the hole in the hull and that they grew up

---

3 In the census of the Cape of Good Hope, for example, there was a distinction between the Khoekhoe and Bushman, while Bushman was listed under ‘Aboriginal Natives’ and the Khoekhoe included under ‘Mixed and Others’ in the Orange River Colony (1900–1910).

4 In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed, consisting of four provinces: Natal, Transvaal, the Orange Free State and the Cape Province. Only the Cape Province had a (qualified) non-racial franchise, while Natal had (nominal) voting rights for non-Whites. The former Boer Republics, Transvaal and the Orange Free State, had a Whites-only franchise (Van den Berghe 1970).

5 Collaborators who assisted in conducting interviews were M. Besten, C. Human and A. Peters.

6 We are aware of the epistemological reservations about the concept ‘informant’. However, we have decided to use it in this article because the people we had interviewed are the main source of our information. We acknowledge them as the original creators of the text. Our analyses and interpretations are secondary to the original text and therefore we, and not they, can be regarded as the co-creators.

7 The study was part of a larger project, describing and analysing changing political preferences amongst Khoe-San and Baster communities in South Africa and Namibia. The interviews were conducted by B. de Graaff and G. Snoeijer.
without parents, consequently never learning a language. This is said to be the reason why the languages of the Khoe-San apparently sounded like the sounds that children make (Chidester 1996; Schrire 2009).

Genetic studies confirm that the Khoe-San became genetically separated from other modern people approximately 100 000 years ago, and that they split into a northern grouping (|Xwm/|Xw and Ju’hoansi) and a southern grouping (Tuu, #Khomani and Nama) about 35 000 years ago. The genomic variation that exists between the northern and southern Khoe-San groups means that the Khoe-San is not a homogeneous group, and that their origin therefore cannot be localised to a single specific point (Schlebusch et al. 2012). Late Stone Age Khoe-speaking hunter-gatherers could either have moved gradually southward through Tanzania to southern-central Africa (the northern part of Botswana and the adjoining south of Zimbabwe) and settled there approximately 2 000 years ago (there is a difference of opinion about possible dates: Johnson 2004; Liebenberg 1990; Marais 1968; Molema 1920; Stow 1905), or they could have originated in said area, a possibility mentioned by Barnard (1992) and Morris (2003).

According to Henn et al. (2008), an independent migration of Early Iron Age Bantu-speaking farmers followed the same route to southern-central Africa—presumably along a tsetse fly-free corridor—as the Late Stone Age Khoe-speaking hunter-gatherers. Humphreys (1981), concurring with historical linguists like Westphal in particular, assumes that the stated two groups made contact in the southern-central region, because this is the area where Tshu-Khwe—which is related to Dama, Nama and the Cape Khoe-Khoe languages—is found. However, authors such as Smith (1986), Klein (1986) and Crawhall (2006) question this, and draw attention to the problematic nature of the relationship between linguistics, genetic research and archaeology, because the languages/dialects spoken by the Cape Khoe-Khoe had been badly decimated or had disappeared before adequate linguistic records could be made, and because language cannot be tied to race.

Archaeologists assume that the Late Stone Age Khoe-speaking hunter-gatherer communities initially obtained sheep and later also cattle8 from the Early Iron Age Bantu-speaking farmers (Smith & Ouzman 2004). From their southern-central African area the Khoe-speaking herders moved southward. Most sources accept that one of two basic routes were followed (Klein 1986; Sadr 1998); however, Barnard (1992) refers to three possible options, while the possibility of multiple introductions of herding along different routes at different times cannot be excluded (Klein 1986; Sadr 1998). Concerning the school of thought of the two basic routes, it is on the one hand accepted that the Khoe-Khoe migrated in a south-western direction until they reached the Atlantic coast and then moved southward to the Western and Eastern Cape (Cooke 1965; Engelbrecht 1937; Molema 1920; Stow 1905). On the other hand, based on better grazing and availability of water sources, other researchers assume that the migration took place in a more south-eastward direction (Barnard 1992; Elphick & Malherbe 1990; Klein 1986; Rudner 1979). According to Elphick (1977), the migration of the Khoe-Khoe probably followed the tributaries—the Harts, Vaal, Riet, Modder and Vet Rivers—in the central parts of the country, and according to his initial calculations (he later changed his view) reached the southern tip of Africa not long before the first European seafarer, Bartholomeu Dias, rounded the Cape in 1488 in his search for trade routes to the east.

The coinage of the term ‘Khoisan’ is attributed to German physical anthropologist Leonard Schultz who used it in 1928 as a collective term for ‘Hottentot’ and ‘Bushman’ (Schapera 1965). In this article the term ‘Khoe-San’ will be used instead of Khoisan. Hyphenating the two terms takes into account the objection by many Bushmen that they should not be subordinated to or subsumed within Khoekhoe groupings (Besten 2011). Although both the terms ‘San’ and ‘Bushman’ have denigratory histories, many scholars (Corry 2012; Guenther 1977; Smith et al. 2004) prefer to use ‘Bushman’ to refer to the early inhabitants of southern Africa who spoke click languages and lived mainly by hunting and gathering, in contradistinction to the Khoe-speaking herders. In the current South African context, the term ‘Bushman’ refers to groups like the !Xwm/!Xw, Khwe, Tuu, #Khomani and the Ju’hoansi. The collective term Khoe-Khoe is being used here because it is regarded as a more accurate linguistic rendering than ‘Khoi-Khoi’. Khoe-Khoe suggests ‘men of men’ or ‘people’. The Khoe-Khoe include people like the Nama, Griqua and Korana as well as various so-called revivalist groups such as the Inqua, Chonaqua, Attaqua and Chainoqua.

**EXPERIENCE OF HUMILIATION**

Different criteria were used by the apartheid regime to separate Coloured people from White people. Some of these were: characteristics of the person’s head hair; characteristics of a person’s other hair; skin colour; facial features; home language and knowledge of Afrikaans; area where the person lived; the person’s friends and acquaintances; employment; socioeconomic status; and eating and drinking habits. The notorious ‘pencil test’ was used often in order to assess whether a person had Afro-textured hair. In

---

8 Cattle seem to have been a much later introduction than sheep (Mitchell & Whitelaw 2005).
this test, a pencil was pushed through a person’s hair. How easily it came out determined whether the person ‘passed’ or ‘failed’ the racial classification test.

An informant told the following about his experience the day he was classified:

Then you just got a dompas. In 1961 they came to snap us. It was standing in the queue. We had to stand in the queue. ‘Unity is strength’ and you each have to have a dompas. Researcher: Why do you think were you classified as a Coloured person? ‘I can’t tell you about that. The trouble is that they did not tell one why. They just said, ‘A dog wears a ticket’. Exactly. We just had to accept it.

Fifty years on an informant still remembers the experiences of the day of registration:

But that day with the identity card, when it was completed, I don’t know did I speak there myself; I really can’t know now. It was a quick thing. One’s name and one’s surname and one’s address. I remember we had come from the wood, and then we had to go down here quickly.

She continued and indicated that she had to accept being a Coloured person although she was Griqua:

I could not do anything. With our parents, one can say, we did not interfere. Yes. Because the children of that time could not cross question the parents. But now, now I want to be Hotnot, Khoi-Khoi, you know. I remember in Bloemfontein we also had to complete forms. But still, it was a pleasure for me to know where I am descended from. From my mother’s side, that’s a Khoi.

The parents of an informant who grew up with his grandmother lived in the same residential area as the grandmother. The informant’s father was a Xhosa. His parents were classified different in the house. Look, the Coloureds were actually born between the Nama and the White people. And the one problem that we have with the Coloured people is that in most cases they look down upon Nama people. Yes, they look down on Nama people because we, because the Nama have short hair; he looks stupid, the little nose is flat, the Coloured people have long hair; look like the White people, blue little eyes and an upright little nose. It is a very, very discouraging situation that the Coloured people look down upon the Nama.

One would like to imagine that the opportunity the research afforded people, to talk about that humiliations and shame, but also their rediscovery of identities, contributed to some extent to their healing and liberation.

INCONSISTENT APPLICATION OF CRITERIA

It is almost axiomatic that the application of the above mentioned amorphous criteria used to separate Coloured from Black and White persons resulted in strange outcomes. In a specific case, for instance, members of the same family were classified into different categories:

And they registered my dad White, not as a Coloured person. He was a White person with his silver hair. He never claimed to be a White person. This is the truth. That was the truth. Yes, he was registered that way.

In another family the following occurred:

I don’t know. At home we were Coloureds, Other Coloureds, Cape Coloureds and Griquas. We were classified different in the house. Look, at that time there wasn’t a platform where one could claim one’s identity, you know. Understand? And say, ‘Listen here’, or whether it is even the registrar of population or whatever it is, where one could go to express one’s grievances or one’s disgruntlement. We did not have something like that, but we had to accept it.

In the application of apartheid there was little question of a humane approach. Years on there is still a bad taste in the mouths of those who were on its receiving end. The Population of Registration Act, 1950 (Act 30 of 1950), did not only cause resentment towards the ‘hegemonic (white) others’ who enforced the Act, but also caused friction between Khoe-San and (black) Africans and between Khoe-San and Coloureds. One Nama informant told us how Coloured people, who were slightly better off under the Apartheid regime, still looked at his people with disdain:

Was such cut off, as they say. What did they call that thing, quarantine, was a quarantine business.
In another case an informant was classified as Tswana although he was Griqua, because he lived in a Tswana area.

For that reason we were classified as Tswanas. Everybody. As Blacks. Everybody. We got that book, that small ID book, together. We were classified as Blacks, but at that time when things came right [1994 dispensation], we brought our Griqua [identity]; we then abandoned the Tswana [identification].

The opposite also occurred where somebody of Xhosa descent who spoke Afrikaans was classified as a Coloured person:

As Coloured person, yes. They probably just put their own stuff down. I don’t know.

If one considers the unscientific nature of the so-called classification criteria used to assign an identity to people, it is not strange that its application had divergent/contradictory results. Its effect on people’s lives was often of a traumatic nature.

RECLAIMING OF IDENTITY

Identification is basically a process of self-assignment and assignment by others. However, in South Africa the reality was that it was only the hegemonic ‘others’—because they had the political power—who had a say in this regard. Inevitably this caused psychological distortions that plunged individuals into uncertainty about their true identity. Two elderly sisters who lived together, for instance, could not agree whether they were Griqua or Coloured. In the end the one answered: ‘I am just a human being’, while the other said, ‘I think I am a Coloured person’. In another case, an informant explained his situation as follows:

I had identified myself as Griqua, but then, back when the Commissioner was still here [in Bloemfontein], he said no such thing existed. You are not a Griqua; you are a Cape Coloured person. And so on that Cape Coloured person they registered me. So then I did not know: Am I a Griqua or am I a Cape Coloured person? What is actually wrong?

Someone whose parents were Korana said:

Look, I was born a Korana. So when the Boers changed it, they said we were Coloured persons. Ja, so we just carried on, because Afrikaans was also the language that we spoke at home.

In response to the question whether he regarded himself as a Coloured person, he answered uncertainly: ‘No, uhm yes’.

The advent of the democratic dispensation afforded South Africans and Namibians the constitutional opportunity for re-interpretation of their ethnic category. Some of the informants who availed themselves of this opportunity found greater clarity and certainty about their identity. Re-interpretation has brought them a sense of belonging:

Look, let us put it this way: When we grew up, because we had been told by the government, then it was said you do this and you do this. Look, we became what the government said. Then one is a Coloured, then one is a Cape Coloured person. Then one is that, then one is that. We were not really free; nobody had the freedom to say, listen, I am this or that or that. One was what they [the government] said. I mean, if one looks at the Blacks. They [the government] told them they were Bantus. Then they were Natives. Then they were Plurals. Then they were this. Then they were this. They [the government] told one who and what one was. And we just grew up, when we grew up, we knew what we were: Coloured person or Other Coloureds.’

Now that he has the right to identify himself, he says:

I am a Korana. I was born as a Korana. Actually there isn’t such a thing as a Coloured person. One is a Griqua or one is a Korana or one is a Bushman, or yes, something. But there is no such thing as a Coloured person.

Another informant, also of Korana descent, rejected the notion of being a ‘Coloured person’ as well. He stated categorically that:

Our ancestors said that they were Korana and we are Korana and we are not the Coloured people, because the Coloured people (...) is only the name that they [the government] gave us and they [the government] took away the old Korana name (...) and (...) deprived us of our language, because our ancestors should not speak the language and we children should not speak the languages at school, it was taken away from us.”

It would seem fair to suggest that many, if not most, present day Griqua and Korana in South Africa agree that a ‘Coloured person’ is, for them, someone with a light to dark brown skintone and not belonging to an

9 It must be mentioned here that people in Namibia had more possibilities of retaining their (self-assigned) identity. For instance, Coloured people could let themselves be classified as Basters, Cape Coloureds or Namibian Coloureds. Sometimes Nama people registered as Coloureds as well.

10 The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), for example, addresses the historical injustice, as it affords constitutional accommodation and recognition, including the right to self-determination, to the Khoe-San.
indigenous Khoe-San tribe. Someone who, therefore, has no claim to any ‘ancestral land’. In fact, some go as far as to say that the Khoe-San, since they are the ‘true’ indigenous people of South Africa, are the only rightful owners of the land. Someone told us the Korana even have a saying about this:

The White man, he tills the land
The Black man, he governs the land
The Korana, he owns the land
Coloured: where is your land?*

LINGERING UNCERTAINTY

Some people are still caught up between the parameters of their apartheid identity and cannot existentially extricate themselves from it. The uncertainty brought about by apartheid’s race classification remains, and they are still struggling with it in one way or the other. For instance, there was the informant who was adamant about being a Coloured person:

Because I am really not a Khoe-San. But I don’t even know the language. How will you take it? You see? I speak Afrikaans. I can’t even understand English. I just know English there and there. I speak Afrikaans. Afrikaans is the first language that I know. I can’t commit myself for a thing that I don’t know. Or what do I say? We are mixed with the people. But I am still a Coloured person. Because I can’t see past that. Like I am saying, you see it makes one a bit stupid. They [Khoe-San revival leaders] say now one must say one is a Khoe-San, but I don’t even know the language. How can I go and agree there and I don’t even know my language?

Another informant who did not feel up to changing his apartheid era identity, explained it as follows:

No, so far I am a Coloured person. When I took my identity card, it said I was a Coloured person. I did not even know what that was. What must I do now? Yes, that was the time of poor Hotnot. I am now sixty-five. I still remember; I was sixteen. Because you see, my children also don’t know what they are. They are just Coloureds as well. I have four sons. All four of them are Coloured.

There are also those who have rational reservations about the possibility of redefining:

If the White people had asked me to write it myself, then I would’ve written ‘Griqua’. They couldn’t have said I am a half-breed [Coloured person], interbred. We said we were Grijquas. Today, how shall I say? I just have to keep saying I am a Griqua, Khoe-San, but I don’t know the language. But I know, I realise I must come over to the Khoe-San.

The reasoning above was that when only the hegemonic ‘other’ has a say in the identity assignment of the individual, it inevitably causes distortions. The empirical data presented confirmed that such distortions were responsible for creating uncertainties that influenced individuals’ understanding of their human-ness.

KHOE-SAN AND COLOURED

For the majority of the informants, regardless of their sex, age, educational qualifications or place of residence, it was unacceptable to be classified as a Coloured person.

But like I am saying, for me it is not acceptable if the Griqua or the Korana is referred to as descendants of the so-called Coloured people. Coloured people do not really have background. Where does he come from? Do you understand? The people who have history, who have background – they are the Grijquas and so on. One can trace from where they came, their origin and all those types of things. How can I put it, I won’t say that, because there is not a person from whom one comes and nowhere in history will somebody be able to tell me that they are descended from a Coloured person. (...) You understand? Let me say a Coloured person is just somebody who is identified. You see, who does not have identity, then one is called a Coloured person. Now this is the thing that I am saying, therefore I say that the Coloured people are people who do not really know where they are descended from. Look, let us say for example our parents were Grijquas, our great-grandfather and all those types of things. We can refer to it, but, I mean, a Coloured person, to what, to whom does he refer?

In another case, an informant expressed himself as follows about the same matter:

The race that is called Coloureds is very wrong. It is the Griqua, Korana, Khoe-San. There is no such thing as a Coloured person. What I am saying to you today: ‘There is no such thing as a Coloured person!’ You know, let us look at it. The Boers classified us. That one is Black; that one is the Bushman. Then they said there are not Bushmen anymore. The Bushmen are on that side. The Coloured people, the Korana, the Grijqua are Coloured people. Like it is now. I want to tell you the truth now, there are not Coloured people. There are not Coloured people. Look, our people multiplied. They lived like the lot of Bethanie, the lot of Philippolis, on their own. And then the Boers came. They brought us together. They built us locations, like they built and classified us. That one is a Bantu, that one is a Coloured person, so I just know my dad told me it is wrong; we are Koranas.
An informant told about her dad:

My dad just signed with Griqua. My dad often spoke the language. Even if he was sitting alone, he was speaking with his language. Then he told us straight, 'I am not a Coloured person. I am a Griqua. This is my language that I am speaking.' They can't just come and make me a Coloured person. I thought the Coloured people don't have a country, you know. That's how I think. No, the Coloured people do not have a country. I feel we can't. They say Coloured people don't have land. (...) one can call oneself a Griqua. Coloured people don't have kings or presidents, you know. The whole time I've been classified as Coloured person. The whole time just a Coloured person. Just now, just recently when the Griquas started to do their business with their house-to-house calls and then they found out and explained to us now: 'Coloured person is a thing that does not exist. Griqua is.' Just recently that they started here. Yes, a Coloured person does not exist any more. Khoe-San and the Griquas are a tribe.

The same opinion was repeated in another case:

I am a Griqua. I mean, a Coloured person, that's somebody who, like I said, is somebody without background: one does not know where he comes from, how he stands. He does not have descendants, what one thinks could have been his great-grandfather. Look here, either one's great-grandfather was a Griqua, or whatever, or was descended from a Black. But these Coloured people, who originated just the other day, no.

In reply to a question about how an informant identified himself, the answer was: 'Look, we just fall under that category of Coloured person.' The rest of the interview proceeded as follows:

Researcher: ‘On what basis do you identify yourself as a Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Well, you know, that is how we have been classified.’
Researcher: ‘In other words, you are a Coloured person because you have been classified that way?’
Informant: ‘Yes. In 1961, when England handed South Africa over to Dr Verwoerd, which he proclaimed the Republic of South Africa, then we were also classified as Coloured people.
Researcher: ‘Are you content with your identity as Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Why do we have to? It was the policy of the government of that time. My grandpa, he was a Griqua, because both my Grandpa and my grandma spoke the Griqua language. We are actually descended from there. To make a long story short: It is true that we have been classified as Coloured people, but we are really Griquas because we are descended from the Griquas. But I can't show you on my ID that I am a Griqua.’

One informant claimed he always knew he was a Griqua, although, when he was a young boy, the adults did not speak Xiri in front of their children:

I became a Griqua, because when I was actually just so small I heard the people speak the Griqua language. And then I always asked my father: ‘So father, we are also Griqua, isn’t it?’ Answered father: ‘Yes, I am Griqua, you are Griqua’. I have a Griqua blood in me. There is a blood line of the Griqua.’

Korana informants mentioned the same (self-imposed) language deprivation: their parents and grandparents did not speak !Ora in front of them, because they didn’t want their (grand)children to bear the stigma of backwardness. Some Korana, notably descendants of chief Goliath Yzerbek (Fig. 1) of Bethanie (Free State), even lost their surname during the apartheid era, when civil servants simply registered them as ‘Beck’:

Researcher: ‘On what basis do you identify yourself as a Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Well, you know, that is how we have been classified.’
Researcher: ‘In other words, you are a Coloured person because you have been classified that way?’
Informant: ‘Yes. In 1961, when England handed South Africa over to Dr Verwoerd, which he proclaimed the Republic of South Africa, then we were also classified as Coloured people.
Researcher: ‘Are you content with your identity as Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Why do we have to? It was the policy of the government of that time. My grandpa, he was a Griqua, because both my Grandpa and my grandma spoke the Griqua language. We are actually descended from there. To make a long story short: It is true that we have been classified as Coloured people, but we are really Griquas because we are descended from the Griquas. But I can’t show you on my ID that I am a Griqua.’

One informant claimed he always knew he was a Griqua, although, when he was a young boy, the adults did not speak Xiri in front of their children:

I became a Griqua, because when I was actually just so small I heard the people speak the Griqua language. And then I always asked my father: ‘So father, we are also Griqua, isn’t it?’ Answered father: ‘Yes, I am Griqua, you are Griqua’. I have a Griqua blood in me. There is a blood line of the Griqua.’

Korana informants mentioned the same (self-imposed) language deprivation: their parents and grandparents did not speak !Ora in front of them, because they didn’t want their (grand)children to bear the stigma of backwardness. Some Korana, notably descendants of chief Goliath Yzerbek (Fig. 1) of Bethanie (Free State), even lost their surname during the apartheid era, when civil servants simply registered them as ‘Beck’:

Researcher: ‘On what basis do you identify yourself as a Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Well, you know, that is how we have been classified.’
Researcher: ‘In other words, you are a Coloured person because you have been classified that way?’
Informant: ‘Yes. In 1961, when England handed South Africa over to Dr Verwoerd, which he proclaimed the Republic of South Africa, then we were also classified as Coloured people.
Researcher: ‘Are you content with your identity as Coloured person?’
Informant: ‘Why do we have to? It was the policy of the government of that time. My grandpa, he was a Griqua, because both my Grandpa and my grandma spoke the Griqua language. We are actually descended from there. To make a long story short: It is true that we have been classified as Coloured people, but we are really Griquas because we are descended from the Griquas. But I can’t show you on my ID that I am a Griqua.’

One informant claimed he always knew he was a Griqua, although, when he was a young boy, the adults did not speak Xiri in front of their children:

I became a Griqua, because when I was actually just so small I heard the people speak the Griqua language. And then I always asked my father: ‘So father, we are also Griqua, isn’t it?’ Answered father: ‘Yes, I am Griqua, you are Griqua’. I have a Griqua blood in me. There is a blood line of the Griqua.’

Korana informants mentioned the same (self-imposed) language deprivation: their parents and grandparents did not speak !Ora in front of them, because they didn’t want their (grand)children to bear the stigma of backwardness. Some Korana, notably descendants of chief Goliath Yzerbek (Fig. 1) of Bethanie (Free State), even lost their surname during the apartheid era, when civil servants simply registered them as ‘Beck’:

---

11 This answer may lead to the (incorrect) assumption that racial classification and pass-laws only applied after South Africa became a republic in 1961. However, the Population Registration Act was already passed in 1950 and the legal position of Khoe-San and Coloured persons didn’t change by South Africa becoming a Republic.
The reason of the surname, our surname, eh, Beck, is because they [government officials] said the ‘Yzer’ is too long, and it isn’t good. The first, the Europeans said that the surname was too long.

KHOE-SAN AND AFRICANS

Some people were emotionally overwhelmed by their (re)discovered ethnic identity in the new, democratic South Africa, even though they couldn’t speak a word of their original mother tongue. An elderly lady told us about the hardships she had to endure when she was young. She still lives in poverty today, but

since I am now standing with the Griqua, I now completely feel that I also can get a little bit of water; I can also eat some porridge. (...) Great, I said: now, now I am living. The Griqua people. I am so happy about it. Ooo, I am happy! I am happy, I am happy, I am happy.

Another woman couldn’t believe she and her people were finally getting attention from researchers:

I don’t have the words to say how pleased I myself am to start again a new beginning as a Griqua again, with our own tradition (...). You know, when we received the message that there are people who are looking for the Kok family, the descendants of Cornelius Kok, and we were so happy, we looked forward, we could not wait for this day (...) that we could meet you [respectfully directed at the researchers].*

Although most people indicated that they were not and did not want to be Coloured people, the majority of them were of the opinion that they were still being labelled in terms of it by others. Members of the community still regard them and refer to them as Coloured people and this causes a feeling of distance and a lack of integration between people from different backgrounds. For example, the stigma of ‘Coloured person’ adversely affected relationships with Africans:

If they [Africans] tell me I am a Coloured person, then I tell him he is a Kaffir. Then he says to me, ‘You can’t talk to me like that.’ Then I say, ‘No, you are saying I am a Coloured person, aren’t you?’

When it was brought to informants’ attention that it was beneficial to them to be classified as Coloured people during the Apartheid era, they reacted that it was precisely because of that that they are currently being marginalised by the ANC government12:

Man, they [Africans] say, ‘Coloured person, you came with the master.’ That is why we [the Coloured people] are having such a rough time now. They [Africans] say we are Coloured people. You know, they say we ate with the White man. And in the meantime we were only in those years when the Black man could not yet get liquor, but then the Coloured people already got liquor, you know. Then they [Africans] said, ‘Yes, the Black man could not enter at the gate when the Coloureds could go around the corner of the house, come and stand at the kitchen, or at the apple tree or the fig tree. Then the Black man was standing outside.’

Two informants, both of them from the same village, told us their living conditions had not improved under majority rule and that they still feared the loss of their ethnic identity as Griqua:

And as I said to you: currently we indeed live under a great oppression. With this Black government it is only Black people who benefit, indeed we have absolutely nowhere any say any more. (...) I will be very pleased if my tribe’s heritage can also be recognised a bit, (so that) I can also raise my children and my child’s children according to my tradition again. I won’t, shouldn’t want to see that this tribe of mine become extinct.*

Another informant, a Namibian citizen, was even more outspoken. He told us that the successive colonial governments (German and South African) had succeeded in breaking his people’s morale and said the current Swapo-government didn’t do anything to rectify past wrong-doings. In fact:

I as a Nama feel in reality that I am now under the third colonial government. The Nama does not respect himself and for this reason other people actually often also do not respect him. Thus, his morale is completely broken.

The same, though less outspoken sentiment was voiced by another Namibian:

We have a very beautiful government. Its laws are good, but if I, I am a father (...), now I must bring up those children I received who are without parents together with my own children. (...) And as a citizen of the country, a loyal citizen, I can see how the government treats his own people. My government must act as a father for all.7

However, he went on to say, the government neglected to do its ‘paternal duties’. For example, he, the informant, thought it a disgrace for children and (jobless)

12 The perception amongst many Khoe-San is that they are just as marginalised under the ANC government as they were under the previous government (Adhikari 2005; Ruiters 2009, De Graaff 2017).
BACK TO THE ROOTS?

It is generally accepted that identity is fluid. On the one hand, the empirical data illustrated that some form or other of alienation, whether with the self or with the other, is a possibility when identity is deprived of its fluidity, in the sense that the individual cannot make choices about his/her identity because a permanent identity has been forced on him/her. On the other hand, it has also emerged that informants distinguished between an official/objective and a private/subjective identity. The former category was not negotiable, hardly flexible and represented an instrument of the state’s political power. Informants expressed strong sentimental desires/nostalgic yearnings for some form or other of returning to their roots. These emotions were often fed by their memories - and vice versa. In this regard one should keep in mind that there is only a thin dividing line between ‘returning to one’s roots’ and the ‘invention of tradition’. The many claims to traditional leadership within different Khoe-San groups may in some cases be seen as an example of newly invented ‘traditions’.

Although many informants spoke with pride of their new self-assumed identity, a feeling of shame was also sometimes perceptible—shame because they did not do more in the past to preserve their Khoe-San identity.

CONCLUSION

This article combines the research results of two different investigations which were conducted in two different countries and during two different years. Even though the socio-political situation of the Khoe-San in Namibia (Fig. 2) differs in many regards from that in South Africa, and thus deserves a separate study, the two countries share a history of apartheid with the same long-term consequences of legally enforced, and often arbitrary, ethnic division lines drawn between population groups. Given this common denominator, we are of the opinion that the research results could be compared quite fruitfully. What is of further interest is that this combined study shows that between 2007 and 2015, and indeed more than twenty years after the end of apartheid, both the Namibian and South African governments have little process to put on record with regard to the elimination of the sense of social and cultural marginalisation among the Khoe-San.

The apartheid ideology’s basic ontological assumption was that culture, nation and identity could be epistemically aligned. This formed the basis for the formulation of the assumptions that one culture represents a society and vice versa; that a homogenous patterned prototype of a culture, often cast in images of the ‘other’, can be abstracted; and that culture is ‘shared’ by all the members of a society. Against this background it was essential for the government to assign to individuals a clear, set identity. It was indeed the measure according to which it could be determined who and what the individual was and how he/she had to be treated.

Ethnic classification by the state was a powerful instrument of political control. By creating ethnic boundaries the state could, with apartheid, achieve its ideological aims. People on the receiving end of these hegemonic processes did not have the power, ability and formal channels to illustrate their disapproval and rejection of their assigned ethnic labels. However, individuals were at liberty to over- or under-communicate their official identity. Certain individuals succeeded in disputing and downplaying this assigned identity in a fairly successful, informal way. In other cases, individuals manipulated it to their advantage by means of instrumental articulation, and profited from the fact that they were classified as Coloured people; and were given preferential treatment above black Africans on the labour market and regarding housing.

The fact that Khoehoe and San languages have become virtually extinct, to give way to Afrikaans as the Khoe-San’s first language, is of paramount significance. Although it means that the traditional role allocated to language as identity marker is absent, it does not mean that language is not important. In general, informants emphasised that efforts had to be made to preserve and revive the Khoehoe and San languages, and that the absence of these languages hampered revival: ‘How can I call myself a Khoe-San if I can’t even speak the language?’

The assigned ethnic label of ‘Coloured person’ had an important influence on the lives of individuals, as will be, in all probability and increasingly, the case for the newly-assumed ethnic label of ‘Khoe-San’. At this stage there is an impression that informants tend to place more emphasis on their ethnicity than on their nationality. The Khoe-San lay the blame for their marginalised position in South African and Namibian societies at the door of their respective government(s), past and present. There is, however, a real possibility that the emphasis they place on ethnicity in favour of nationality can be conducive to self-marginalisation. In the apartheid era people were told (and taught) by the government to be proud of their ethnic identity. Traces of this are still lingering today. For example, one informant told us his people are highly intelligent and this may be one of the reasons why these people [the government] are afraid to give us a position and a job because we are going to out-perform them.”
Only one informant seemed acutely aware of the danger of placing too much stress on ethnicity as a (sole) source of self-esteem:

*I am proud that I am a Nama, but on the other hand I must also realise that at the same time I place myself on wrong ground to, through my proudness, disregard the other, the other.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the reviewers, Hans Ester (Radbond Universiteit, Nijmegen, Netherlands), Johan Cronje (Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, Kimberley) and Jan van der Merwe (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein).

REFERENCES


