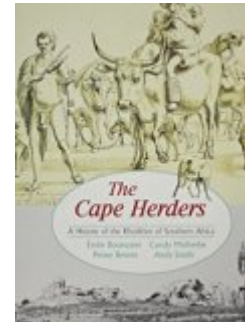


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emile Boonzaier, Candy Malherbe, Andy Smith, Penny Berens. *The Cape Herders: A History of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997. viii + 147 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1174-2.

Reviewed by Brian Siegel (Furman University)
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First published in 1996 by Cape Town's David Philip press (and presumably part of its "People of Southern Africa" series), this brief student text scans the history of the Khoikhoi peoples, from the prehistoric expansion of sheepherding hunters down the western coast some 1800 years ago, to the contemporary land and identity struggles in the Namaqualand Reserves. It is impossible to sandwich this entire history into a book of this length. Thus the measured narrative pace of the initial and concluding chapters breaks into a headlong rush about midway through, and the chapters covering the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries conclude with page-long lists of unanswered questions. But the entire history is outlined here, and this book's functional bibliography and forty-odd drawings invite readers to search out the answers for themselves.

The Cape's indigenous sheep, goat, and cattle herders had no collective name for themselves, but they certainly would have understood the twentieth-century ethnonym, *Khoikhoi* (meaning "real people"), one based upon the term by which they distinguished themselves from the neighboring San. In most histories, these indigenous herders are assigned bit parts in the drama of South Africa's European conquest. They appear early in the first act to protest da Gama's unbidden use of local springs, they fight a losing battle to deny Van Riebeeck's people their herds and pasture lands, and then conveniently make their exit after the 1713 smallpox epidemic.

But this plot only works if one's stage is limited to the western Cape, and if one ignores the flow of genes, people, and culture traits which marked the post-contact history of the Khoikhoi under their many names—the seventeenth-century Hottentots; the Bosjemans (Bush-

men), Bastaards/Basters (later, Griquas), and Bastaard-Hottentots of the eighteenth century; and the Coloureds of the later nineteenth century. In this book Boonzaier (anthropologist), Malherbe (historian), Smith (archaeologist), and Berens (teacher/writer) pool their collective expertise to show the central roles these marginalized peoples played in South Africa's historical drama, and to try to understand how they saw their incorporation in it.

Divided among thinly scattered and rival groups, these Cape pastoralists were unable to satisfy or long resist the colonizers' unlimited demands for cattle and land. Some became hereditary client herdsmen to the freeburghers and early trekboers. Some moved east, alongside or among the Xhosa. And still others moved into the more arid lands to the north. Though the Khoikhoi were not wiped out by the 1713 smallpox epidemic, most had lost all of their former autonomy, and many of the stockless ones had joined with the San as stock-raiding foragers.

For some time now it has been argued that the permeability of this late seventeenth-/early eighteenth-century boundary between San hunters and Khoikhoi herders was a long-standing feature of South African prehistory—that these hunters and herders were really the same people, and that the hunters were just stockless herders. But the archaeological comparison of the ostrich shell beads, tools, and faunal remains from the Witklip and Kasteelberg sites in the Western Cape suggests that they were occupied, respectively, by culturally distinct hunting and herding groups by about 1800 years ago. In short, the distinction between San hunters and Khoikhoi herders—one central to the contrast between "real people" and San, and one observed during the initial contact period—seems to

have characterized the prehistoric period too.

Much of the historical record on the Khoikhoi is mistaken or misleading, and one characteristic feature of this book is its self-conscious attempt to penetrate beyond the documentary evidence—the fifteenth- to seventeenth-century sailors’ and Dutch governors’ journals, the eighteenth-century explorers’ and travelers’ accounts, and the nineteenth-century mission records—to discover just what the Khoikhoi were really doing and thinking then. “Interpreting the historical record,” just one of this book’s three dozen highlighted boxes, reminds its readers that these records were written by different categories of people for different reasons, and that they incorporate different ethnocentric assumptions and invidious stereotypes. The next dozen boxes then illustrate the Khoikhoi’s varied responses to their experience with biographical sketches of notable seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century individuals, including Khoikhoi interpreters, travelers, converts, captains, and a missionary. Above all else, these sketches amply demonstrate “how often collaboration and resistance [with and against Europeans] are united in the same person” (p. 88). Thus this little history goes out of its way to encourage a critical appreciation for the writing and interpretation of historical texts.

Like America, South Africa has long been a race-conscious society. And while its Khoikhoi or Coloured peoples have long been popularly associated with such stigmatizing stereotypes as “‘illegitimacy, savagery and marginality’” (p. 122), the old ethnic and racial categories have served to foster a recent, nascent pride in Khoikhoi ancestry. Given the historical impediments to acquiring and holding land of their own, it is fitting that this book’s discussion of ethnic pride and consciousness focuses upon the Namaqualand Reserves. For it was here along the Namibia border that the Nama Khoikhoi successfully resisted the plan to abolish communal herding lands, and compelled the new Richtersveld National Park to accommodate local land use rights. These Khoikhoi are not trying to reclaim a racially or culturally “pure” tradition; racial and cultural purity have never been traditional concerns. “Rather, they are acknowledging and professing both their unique history and their common humanity” (p. 142).

Do consider this book for your reading and courses on South and Southern Africa.

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