

Edward Cavanagh. *The Griqua Past and the Limits of South African History, 1902-1994*. African Development Series. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. xii + 140 pp. \$56.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-0343-0778-9.

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## Vanished Hegemonies and Mutable Ethnicities

Despite the title, readers should not expect to find an account of twentieth-century people identifying as Griqua in South Africa. This slim volume, a spin-off from the author's MA thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand, concentrates almost exclusively on the way that the Griqua have been treated in works of history. As a historiographical survey of twentieth-century texts, it leaves little to be desired. Any future researcher interested in the Griqua experience will want to consult this book. It covers virtually all published material, both in English and in Afrikaans. There is also a useful introduction summarizing the rise of the Griqua and their nineteenth-century experience. The final thirty pages include bibliographical notes and lists.

The author concludes that for the first two-thirds of the last century the Griqua suffered grievous neglect from most academic disciplines. In the twilight of the apartheid regime, they attracted renewed interest, in part because of the challenge that they posed to entrenched notions of primordial ethnicities and race. Edward Cavanagh expresses puzzlement that a group that loomed large in the politics of the western Highveld from 1820 to 1870 subsequently dropped out of public discussions. "It seems quite extraordinary," he writes, "that, at one point in time, the ancestors of the Griqua, the Afrikaners, BaSotho and BaTswana have each had their own political communities in the Transorangia, and were near equals in power and influence, yet in the next century, a great historiographical divergence took place, which reordered the Griqua so as to put them at the bottom of the pecking order" (p. 104). The way out of Cavanagh's puzzlement is to analyze each of the terms used in that sentence. Neither the BaSotho, nor the BaTswana, nor the Afrikaners existed as political groupings before the twentieth century. Many maps made between 1820 and 1870 show the Griqua, while none show the Sotho, Tswana, or Afrikaners. They do not even show Voortrekkers,

though historically informed people will recognize them as the "Emigrant Farmers." BaSotho derives from Basuto, the name assigned to the followers of paramount chief Moshweshwe, and later, by French missionaries, to the language that they spoke. That language was, of course, identical to that spoken by people whom English missionaries called Bechuana, from which the word BaTswana derives. Afrikaners, as Floris Van Jaarsveld showed back in the 1960s, only began to recognize themselves as such in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

So what groups do we find in texts and on maps from the 1820s and 1830s? We find, in reasonably close proximity to the Griqua: the Kora, Bergenaars, Lighoya, Mantatees, Hartenaars, Makatis, Hurutshe, Rolong, Bastards, Batlapin, and a great many other names that mean even less to modern South Africans. The point is—as Cavanagh is clearly aware—that identities fluctuate with the passage of time and politics. The Griqua, forged from many different lines of descent, never constituted an ethnic or racial group. Few in number, their continued existence depended on political cohesion—something they lost in the 1870s. The apartheid agenda tried to squeeze them into the artificial racial category of "Coloured"—where they no more belonged than the African descendants of the white adventurers John Dunn and Henry Francis Fynn in KwaZulu Natal. The Griqua's interesting descendants, insofar as they seek a special place in the Rainbow Nation, lack the close association with land that might give them a claim to indigeneity. "Coloured" remains as fraught a classification as it ever was. One final possibility, canvassed a few years go by Hermann Gilliomee in *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003), is that they might identify as Afrikaners. After all, their Calvinist theology was sound and their captains had galloped into battle against the Ndebele alongside Andries Pretorius and Hendrik Potgieter.

The plasticity of the term “Griqua” casts doubt on their modern status as an ethnic group, which is how the author chooses to treat their descendants. For example, he tells us he will not discuss “amateur writings written in the twentieth century by actual Griqua themselves” because of the “ethical question as to whether it is appropriate for me, as an outsider, to use such documents to make an argument about ‘Griqua history’” (p. 15). It seems to me that such an approach to ethnicity would make the writing of practically all South African history impossible. A more sensible methodology is suggested by Norman Davies’s recent book, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* (2011), which treats extinct polities like the Visigoth Kingdom and Borussia

as artifacts incapable of sustaining modern ethnicities.

Cavanagh is to be congratulated for the feat of having an MA thesis published by a commercial firm, but the editors at Peter Lang have allowed a number of elementary errors to slip into print. The Griqua are described as “rather unique” and “quite unique” (pp. 16, 8). A book is said to be “riddled with a few inaccuracies” (p. 51). We are told that a historian “could never really endow the same detail upon the activities of brown and black sovereigns as he did the British colonial administrators.” (Cavanagh also speaks of “their publications, much of it concerned with...” (p. 48). A copy editor might have wielded a blue pencil to good effect.

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