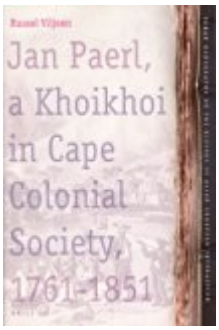
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Russel S. Viljoen. *Jan Paerl: A Khoikhoi in Cape Colonial Society 1761-1851.* Edited by Leonard BlussÃ© and Hendrik E. Niemeijer. Leiden: Brill, 2006. xviii + 213 pp. $99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-15093-5.

Reviewed by Kerry Ward

Published on H-SAfrica (May, 2007)

Readers might find it curious that the first volume of a new monograph series on the history of Asian-European interaction has as its subject the interaction of indigenous Khoekhoe with European settlers in eighteenth-century colonial South Africa. Those familiar with the broader context of Dutch colonialism will not be surprised, as the Cape of Good Hope was part of the Dutch East India Company's Indian Ocean empire. The University of Leiden has begun a new program for training historians from the African and Asian nations in which the Dutch were active colonizers and traders during the early modern period. The research capacity of the old Dutch sources in these countries has been enhanced through this unique doctoral program and the related archival digitizing project. The result is a new generation of African and Asian historians whose training in early Dutch colonial records will produce new perspectives on the colonial pasts of their societies. Russel Viljoen's book is the first publication from this ambitious project.

Viljoen was not a novice doctoral student when he entered the TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership) program at Leiden, having published extensively on Khoekhoe-colonists relationships. *Jan Paerl: A Khoikhoi in Cape Colonial Society, 1761-1851* is the fruition of over a decade's research and writing. The book is one of the few detailed biographies of a Khoekhoe man during the Dutch colonial period and it is in this regard a valuable contribution to the historiography of the period. Sources for indigenous biographies are limited and it is the exceptional person who emerges from the colonial archives in enough detail to trace a full life story. The challenges of such a project are not to be underestimated. Charles van Onselen wrote in his book about the black South African sharecropper, Kas Maine, "this is a biography of a man who, if one went by the official record alone, never was."[1] Kas Maine was able to tell his own story to Van Onselen. Russel Viljoen has had to glean information about Jan Paerl from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archives. In doing so, he has done a remarkable job of bringing to life the story of a charismatic, spiritual, individualistic, and idiosyncratic man. The book brings to mind Robert Ross's *Adam Kok's Griquas*, although this was the story of a

community and their collective fate over generations.[2] Viljoen has managed to write Jan Paerl's biography by tracing his life through his involvement in several communities, from his birth in rural Swellendam; his brief rise to prominence as the leader of an indigenous millenarian movement, *Onsen Liewen Heer*; his subsequent imprisonment and eventual release to become a farm laborer; his assertion of autonomy through migration to a mission station; his conversion and subsequent role as a guide and founding member of a new Moravian community; and his return and eventual death as the oldest resident of the Moravian mission in Genadendal, in the Caledon district of the Western Cape.

Even this thumbnail sketch confirms that Jan Paerl was an exceptional man. Viljoen is able to paint a verbal portrait of Paerl's idiosyncratic personality and his determination, through whatever means necessary, to assert his independence. Paerl occupied an ambiguous position in the racial classifications of Dutch colonial society, being officially labeled a ***Bastaard*** (child of a Khoekhoe mother and European father) but generally perceived and self-identified as Khoekhoe. He was bilingual in Dutch and what Viljoen calls "Khoikhoi" (p. 17), and dressed in both European and indigenous garments. Born on a settler farm in the rural Overburg and raised to labor for a colonial master during a period when the Cape government was attempting to assert stricter control over indigenous people in the region, Paerl spent his life struggling for independence. It was the threat by settler-squatters to the independence of a local Khoekhoe community under the leadership of Cobus Valentijn that set in motion the millenarian movement inspired by Paerl. A battle ensues between the Governor in Cape Town attempting to protect the rights of the Khoekhoe, at least on paper, and the determination of burgher settlers to ignore the authorities in order to secure their own claims to land and labor in the border regions of the colony. Paerl's revelations as *Ons Liewen Heer*, or "Our Dear Lord" (he was also called "God of the Hottentots") provided an indigenous interpretation and solution to the crisis by claiming that the Khoekhoe had been ordered to kill their white cattle, burn their European clothes, build new straw huts with two doors, and at an appointed time to flee to the mountains and wait for the specific day when, with divine intervention, they would kill all the whites and have their land and cattle restored to them. The fact that Paerl attracted hundreds of followers showed the power of his ideas both to his own people and to worried settlers. But the inevitable failure of the movement resulted in settler gains and the decimation of Valentijn's community as well as the disappearance of Paerl.

Viljoen analyzes the millenarian movement as symptomatic of the breakdown and destruction of Khoekhoe society, including the incorporation of Christianity into indigenous beliefs indicated by Paerl's Dutch title *Ons Liewen Heer*. What emerges is an image of social divisions and unstable alliances between Khoekhoe, free blacks, and slaves in terms of both resistance and accommodation in settler society. Divisions also clearly existed in the nodes of power of the colonial administration, with the central authorities theoretically trying to uphold indigenous rights but unable to make rural officials and settlers enforce decrees against their will.

Jan Paerl survived the disillusionment of his failed prophecies and went on to become a laborer raising a family in rural Stellenbosch. A brief period of imprisonment followed when it was discovered that Paerl was the elusive *Ons Liewen Heer*, but the court dismissed the case as one of "madness" rather than "sedition." Paerl thus escaped the death penalty through the trivialization of his revelation and followers. He later proved to be extremely adept at making legal claims to the state in order to protect his rights, construct a stable family life, and assert control over his children in the face of attempts by a Stellenbosch farmer to indenture them.

Paerl and his eldest son sought refuge with the Moravian missionaries who had brought together Khoekhoe converts at Genadendal and where (after training, baptism and communion) he became a leading figure in this strict Christian community. He still managed to assert his independence by leaving temporarily to explore the region, and to assert his non-compliance by living in a stable monogamous relationship without the sanction of marriage. Paerl would have lived out his days in relative obscurity had he not come to the attention of one of the leading Moravians, Christian La Trobe, who visited the Cape and wrote about his journey. Jan Paerl was one of his favorite guides. Paerl's leadership qualities were also readily apparent and he was chosen to help found the mission station Enon on the frontier between the colonists and the Xhosa. His life there was, according to Viljoen, unremarkable, and he eventually returned to live at Genadendal for the next twenty years before he died at the extraordinarily old age of ninety. In the last year of his life on earth, a new millenarian movement, with echoes of his own revelations, captured the hearts of the Khoekhoe residents of Kat River who joined forces with the Xhosa to drive the whites into the sea. The result was disastrous for the Khoekhoe. Viljoen concludes that the periodic resurfacing of millenarian movements amongst Khoekhoe claiming rights to the lands of their ancestors was foundational to the Khoekhoe "nation" (p. 165).

The book is not without flaws, most obviously, there are several sections of the book where the prose is rather repetitive and could have used some judicious editing. A few glaring typos also point to less than stellar editing and proof-reading in what is otherwise a high quality and expensive book. Unless there is a subsidized or locally produced South African paperback edition, this book will probably be financially out of reach for the audience for which it was at least partially intended.

In his epilogue, Viljoen assesses Khoesan attempts at claiming "first nation" status in post-apartheid South Africa. He raises the question of how Jan Paerl is to be remembered and then answers it: "Jan Paerl must certainly be seen as an icon for democracy and South Africa's constitution...[he] is an embodiment of the 'Rainbow Nation' or 'Rainbow People of God' as expressed by Desmond Tutu" (p. 171). Decrying the marginalization of "coloured" South Africans in the new democracy, Viljoen has himself written a book that makes a contribution to creating a new set of national heroes for a new national past.

Notes

[1]. Charles van Onselen, ***The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985*** (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 3.

[2]. Robert Ross, ***Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

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Citation: Kerry Ward. Review of Viljoen, Russel S. *Jan Paerl: A Khoikhoi in Cape Colonial Society 1761-1851*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

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