

## NEWSLETTER 10 March 2011

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Dear friends and relations,

by all accounts the story about Kaptein David Stuurman (Newsletter 9) was well received.

Once again thank you for your questions, corrections and contributions.

Since the Khoi people and their history remains largely airbrushed out of our history I thought I would share information about another contemporary of Zara's, the ultimately tragic and short life of Sarah (Saartje) Baartman. Zara Schmelen would have known of Baartman and Stuurman and she and her family and friends would have felt affected by their fateful lives, I imagine. The display of Sarah Baartman was opposed by abolitionists at the time and reported in the British press. Stuurman is likely to have been a prisoner on Robben Island during one of the Schmelen's visits to Cape Town. The Cape press would have covered his capture and imprisonment. We know that Hinrich avidly read newspapers, including back copies, reading right through the night when they returned to the Cape on visits.

The history of the powerful and influential at the Cape of that time is well recorded and much written about. My intention is to try and discover a little more about the life and times of Zara, our great, great, great (and for some of us: add another two greats!) grandmother.

These are the three Khoi lives that span the period when British rule replaced Dutch rule at the Cape:

Kaptein David Stuurman (ca. 1773 – 1830, aged about 57)

Sarah (Saartje) Baartman (1789-1816, aged 27)

Zara Schmelen (ca. 1793 – 1831, aged about 38)

A quick history lesson, courtesy of Wikipedia tells us:

On 9 July 1795, a squadron of the British fleet under Admiral Keith Elphinstone sailed into Simon's Town harbour, which the VOC had neglected to fortify.

Major-General James Craig and his infantry went ashore and negotiations began, but broke down in early August. A regiment of Khoi [Khoi] soldiers, sent out by their masters to do battle at Muizenberg, retreated after a brief skirmish and the town surrendered.

The cause of the British invasion was war with Napoleon. The Dutch King had fled and a puppet

regime established in Holland. Britain sent troops to the Cape before revolutionary France could capture the strategic port. It was intended as a temporary occupation, until Napoleon was defeated, and the British returned the settlement to Dutch rule when peace was established in 1803.

In January 1806, however, hostilities resumed and the British returned to the Cape, landing to the north of the city at Blouberg. The Scots Highlanders, blowing their pipes, advanced and the mercenaries hired to oppose them fled.

The British remained a 'temporary force' until 1814, when the comprehensive peace following Waterloo gave the Cape to Britain. Up until that time, and for some years to come, the British were content to keep the status quo - perhaps to the surprise of the local people.

The administration of the VOC was retained, the legal system remained Roman-Dutch law and Dutch was used widely in government. The early Governors - like Lord Charles Somerset (1811-26) - were themselves landed aristocrats and had much in common with the powerful Cape landowners.

The story of Sarah Baartman is the story, not of a David Stuurman who fought and resisted colonial encroachments, not of a Zara Schmelen (nee Hendricks) who assimilated into

the colonist's culture, but of a woman who was made a victim of exceptional racial and colonial exploitation.

Most records refer to Saartje rather than Sarah. I use Sarah because the suffix 'tje' (diminutive) is meant to signify endearment but in this context seems patronizing.

Sarah's existence only entered my consciousness in the year 2000 when the media wrote about South Africa's request for her remains to be returned after nearly 200 years on display in a French museum. I had not as yet thought that the two Zara's (or Sarah's) were contemporaries.

This is how I came to play a very minor part to immortalize Sarah Baartman. In the year 2000 I was appointed head of the national Fisheries Department of South Africa. One of my duties was to award a tender to build a new generation of fisheries patrol vessels. The three smaller vessels were built in South Africa, but the large offshore vessel had to be built abroad. The tender for this offshore vessel was awarded to a Dutch company who built the hull in a shipyard in Galati, a town situated where the Danube enters the Black Sea in a Romania, still trying to find its feet in the post communist world. From there the hull was

towed to Vlissingen, Netherlands, where she was fully fitted. I had the honour of sending her to see in Romania and then partake in her launch when she was named in Vlissingen in June 2004.

Prior to that and with the support of Minister Valli Moossa (Environment, at that time) we decided to break with tradition and to call the four new patrol vessels after iconic women who suffered under oppression in our country. We decided to call the first vessel the Sarah Baartman. The other three were named Lilian Ngoyi, Ruth First and Victoria Mxenge.

I invited Diana Ferrus, to the launch. She is a Khoi descendant, a women's rights activist and poet. Diana Ferrus had written a powerful poem to Sarah. The poem became internationally famous when it attracted the attention of a French Senator. He recited her poem in the French Senate as part of the motivation to have Sarah's remains returned from France to South Africa.

This is Diana's poem:

### **A poem for Sarah Baartman**

*By Diana Ferrus*

*"I've come to take you home -*

home, remember the veld?  
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees  
the air is cool there and the sun does not burn.  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckle sing-songs  
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to wretch you away -  
away from the poking eyes  
of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark  
with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit  
who likens your soul to that of Satan  
and declares himself the ultimate god!

I have come to soothe your heavy heart  
I offer my bosom to your weary soul  
I will cover your face with the palms of my hands  
I will run my lips over lines in your neck  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you  
and I will sing for you  
for I have come to bring you peace.

I have come to take you home  
where the ancient mountains shout your name.  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white -  
I have come to take you home  
where I will sing for you  
for you have brought me peace."

Diana Ferrus, wrote "A poem for Sarah Baartman" while studying in Utrecht, Holland, in 1998. She is quoted as saying, "One evening I was looking at the stars and I thought to myself, 'They're so far away. But if I were home, I'd be able to touch every one of them.' My heart just went out to Sarah,

and I thought, 'Oh, god, she died of heartbreak, she longed for her country. What did she feel?' That's why the first line of the poem was 'I've come to take you home.'"

## **The Life of Sarah Baartman (1789-1816):**

When Sarah Baartman boarded the ship headed for London she did not know her body would fuel the racist notions of black inferiority and black female sexuality in Europe, nor that her body parts would be returned to her homeland 187 years later. Dubbed "The Hottentot Venus," she was exhibited as a freak and, in the process, juxtaposed against white ideals of purity, superiority and sexuality. Initially, she was paraded naked at different venues around London and due to agitation by anti-slavery advocates, was taken to Paris. Sarah's predicament embodied racism, sexism and colonialism.

Born in 1789 in the Eastern Cape, Sarah was of Khoi, or San origin, the original inhabitants of southern Africa. The Colonists pejoratively referred to these people as the Hottentots. Europeans viewed the steatopygic - that is fat that is stored in their buttocks - as an abnormality and an attestation of racial inferiority.

While still in her teens, Sarah found herself in Cape Town, where she was a farmer's slave until she was bought, in Cape Town, by William Dunlop, a doctor on a British ship. At age 20, Sarah headed for London with Dr. Dunlop where, it was agreed, they would get rich by displaying her body to Europeans, catering to Europeans' sexual fascination with aboriginal peoples.

Prancing in the nude, with her jutting posterior and extraordinary genitals, she provided the foundation for racist and pseudo-scientific theories regarding black inferiority and black female sexuality. The shows involved Sarah being "led by her keeper and exhibited like a wild beast, being obliged to walk, stand or sit as ordered." Sarah's predicament drew the attention of a young Jamaican, Robert Wedderburn, who agitated against slavery and racism. Subsequently, his group pressured the attorney-general to stop this circus. Losing the case on a technicality, Sarah, after four years in London went to Paris where she was again exhibited in a traveling circus, and seen frequently controlled by an animal trainer in the show.

It was here that she crossed paths with George Cuvier, Napoleon's surgeon-general, who was also the Dean of Comparative Anatomy. In his capacity as social anthropologist, he arrogantly and erroneously concluded that she was the "missing link". She turned to prostitution and when she died poor in 1816, almost immediately, Cuvier had her body cast in wax, dissected and the skeleton articulated. Her organs, including her genitals and brain, were preserved in bottles of formaldehyde. Her remains were displayed at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris until 1974.

Post-apartheid South Africa made efforts to retrieve Sarah's remains. In 1994, then-President Nelson Mandela appealed to his French counterpart, but it was not until 2002 that the French Senate approved a bill for the repatriation of Sarah's remains to South Africa. In May 2002, her remains were brought home



to South Africa after nearly 200 years of humiliation and abuse. In August 2002, she was finally laid to rest in the Eastern Cape.

[The above information was accessed courtesy of several web entries]

You may ask why rake up this past? Why not claim our Zara as the 'success story', a woman who stands out in her own right as a linguist and translator? Our Zara was lucky enough to triumph, in a way, in a period when her people were driven to the brink. But these are all lives that are defining for our country as we try to reclaim the forgotten histories of the vanquished. One should add, the Khoi people were relatively better off than the San who were shot and nearly totally exterminated by colonist raiding parties or *Kommando's*, viewing the San as less than human. I have met people who know that their forebears, 200 years ago, went to hunt and kill San people, sometimes because of stock theft but sometimes as a sport.

History is deficient if we hide the ugly, especially that which may be inconvenient or makes us feel uncomfortable. The history I was taught about our country suited the victors, the rulers and white supremacy. That was half a century ago when I was at school. I am still

unlearning things that were passed down as though they were the truth. Because of the one-sidedness in which our past was taught we have an obligation to search for what was removed or hidden from us. Just like in Chile, Argentina and elsewhere all history has to be confronted and acknowledged if former adversaries have any prospect of building a new future together. South Africa remains a pressing case. – This is true at national level, but it also reaches into many thousands of ordinary South African families. Our family is no exception.

## **A Question**

One question I received after the 'Stuurman' Newsletter was: Was it typical or usual for Khoi people to take on Dutch names at that time? - I am no historian and am only throwing myself into these matters in recent times, but this is my answer:

(I hope that I am not distorting Nigel Penn and his excellent book *The Forgotten Frontier*, which helped me greatly to unlearn what I was brought up with)

Yes, in the early 19th century a great many, if not most Khoi, San, Nama or Oorlam took on Dutch as a *lingua franca* and equally adopted Dutch names besides their own names. In my

youth we were told that they had done this out of reverence for their master or employer. That was clearly untrue. Later we were told that inter-marriage between black and white was the reason, but that cannot explain everything, especially since it evoked dismay already then. The result of seeping of the Dutch language and culture into the people also referred to as 'Coloured' in today's South Africa is complex and the colonized paid a heavy the price.

As the Khoi fled or evaded white rule and white settlements by moving ever further from the Cape, up the west coast until they entered Great Namaqualand (Namibia), they were joined by numbers of white colonists, often felons who were escaping justice in the Cape. They were one group who assimilated into the people living just beyond the boundaries of the colony.

The offspring resulting from liaisons between white masters and their woman slaves (hardly ever the other way round) would be a further factor. The mixed race child stood a better chance to advance and find work with Dutch and a Dutch name. Add to this runaway slaves who escaped from cruelty meted out on the farms and the Dutch East India Company who also joined the people 'beyond the border'. Since a great many slaves came from the

Dutch colonies of Java and Sumatra, they brought Dutch with them. Their own language had little currency amongst the other slaves at the Cape who often came from other countries, including Madagascar and Mozambique. Dutch would have been the most likely medium in which to converse amongst each other.

And then there were other factors such as the influence of the Christian missions. They propagated the gospel and addressed their sermons in the Dutch language, Hinrich Schmelen included (his wife generally translating the text into Khoi/Nama). So, in this way the colonial project reached and had an impact far beyond its own initial ambitions.

Another contributory factor would have been the conscious act of changing your name and language to Dutch when survival often meant finding work on the colonist's farms. The Khoi language and their names were widely considered by the colonists at the time to be beyond learning or mastering.

And so, I explain to myself how a new identity was forged or emerged in the shadow of Dutch and British rule, through circumstances triggered by the expanding colony.

It is interesting to note that the Dutch of the Oorlam people who moved into Namibia, was not connected to the formalization of Afrikaans that was taking place in the white Afrikaner community in the 1920's. The white Afrikaners steered clear of links to the under-class. As a result the people of Oorlam origin living in Namibia today, speak a language that is not fettered by Afrikaans grammar and formality, although proximity and power relations have had their impact. The Afrikaans of the dark-skinned people of Namibia, notably amongst an older generation, is a beautiful dialect that retains much more Dutch than the formal Afrikaans of white Afrikaners. Their language has now been accepted as one of the four dialects of Afrikaans.

### **A Correction.**

Randolph Vigne wrote and noted that David Stuurman's wife could not have petitioned Queen Victoria since her reign only started six years after Stuurman died. However, he writes, the Stuurman family did put their names to a petition to the Cape Governor, Sir Lowry Cole, but this was to no avail. (This is the same Lowry Cole who attended the launch of the New Testament in the Nama language, translated by the Schmелens, published here in Cape Town. Cole offered the Schmелен's his support

if ever they needed it. A while later Hinrich Schmelen did indeed avail himself of the offer. A story for another time)

For those of you interested in the topic, David Stuurman figures in Randolph Vigne's book on Thomas Pringle's South African letters, to be released in October 2011. Pringle, a foremost abolitionist, worked with General Bourke, another governor of the Cape (succeeded by Cole), to get Stuurman released from Botany Bay (New South Wales, Australia) and raised the money in England for his return to the Cape. Some of it was used to improve his living conditions but he died before he could return. Pringle writes about him in his *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* and this correspondence with Bourke is the forthcoming book. Randolph writes: "Pringle was ahead of his time. His poem 'The Forester of the Neutral Ground' is, I think, the first South African poem of love across the colour line, sentimental by today's standards, perhaps, but moving in its way".

### **And lastly**

The book *The Hottentot Venus – The life and death of Saartje Baartman* by Rachel Holmes published by Jonathan Ball and Bloomsbury Publishing in 2007 might interest some of you

(ISBN 978-1-86842-276-0 and ISBN 1-86842-276-3)

Till next time.

Horst.

PS: The posters on London bill-boards read:

New Exhibition

No 225, Piccadilly, near the top of the Hay  
Market

From 12 till 4 o'Clock

Admittance 2s each

The Hottentot Venus,

Just arrived from the Interior of Africa,

The greatest phenomenon ever exhibited in this  
country,

Whose stay in the Metropolis will be but short.

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