
Navigating a minefield to assert agency

By Zenzile Khoisan

Chief! Garu Zenzile Khoisan, leader of the Gorinhaiqua Cultural Council, is also a journalist, poet and cultural activist. He is a leading figure in the First Nations Collective which represents the Gorinhaiqua, Gorachouqua, Cochoqua, the Griqua Royal Council, the San Traditional Royal House and the National Khoi and San Council.

Chief! Garu Zenzile Khoisan argues that the controversial proposed development of the Two Rivers Urban Parkway in Observatory, Cape Town, is a means to develop the linguistic, territorial and cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples and their descendants. And the way to do it, he writes, is through 'cultural agency' by Khoi and San descendants who regard this as one of the first sites of their land dispossession as well as an area where their social and political roots lie deep.

An intense fight for self-determination and the assertion of cultural agency is currently underway at the site earmarked for the River Club redevelopment in the Two Rivers Urban Parkway, near Observatory in Cape Town. This is both the site of the first dispossession and a place of heritage

and great significance to South Africa's indigenous Khoi and San descendants.

It is the contestation over which pathway to choose, after almost every available avenue for resolution has been exhausted. Many of the structures and leaders at what is known as the First Nations Collective, are using cultural agency as a way to find anchorage for the broader and more intense struggle for recognition, restitution and restoration.

There is a vast body of evidence internationally that suggests increasing marginalisation, suppression of rights, discrimination and outright aggression against foundational, indigenous peoples who, more often than not, have found themselves in a position where they have to navigate complex and dangerous political, social, cultural and economic minefields to assert their agency.

Recent and historical examples illustrating the pathway that indigenous peoples have had to traverse to assert agency include the struggles of the Zapatista Maya descendants in Mexico; the struggles in Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia; the intense fights of the ancient peoples of the Amazon; the struggles of the many indigenous peoples in Canada,

the United States, Iceland, Greenland, New Zealand, Australia, Asia and also on the African continent in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. In all of these theatres of struggle numerous strategies and tactics have been employed to challenge injustice.

Whether it has been to defend linguistic, territorial, cultural, indigenous knowledge or territorial rights, the common denominator is that the first, foundational and indigenous peoples are all the descendants of those who were most viciously put to the sword through genocide, dispossessed of their land and dehumanised and driven to the margins of the societies to exist in a purgatory of unprocessed pain.

What then emerges in the question of what is to be done is the assessment of the forces and the tactics to be employed in the quest for change. Notably, we are in a period where there is growing disillusion that local or international state or official institutions can be trusted to right historical wrongs; to shift unjust paradigms. This leaves indigenous social justice movements either gridlocked in bureaucratic official processes, or taking cultural agency to effect an objective.

This type of action is required

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because there is an urgency related to the vanishing borderlands of sentinel points of memory where critical heritage landmarks are disappearing, removed from the narrative of our contemporary world by discriminatory cultural, political, social and economic frameworks driven by mercenary ideologies that damn the narratives and cultural belongings of foundational indigenous peoples to invisibility or evisceration.

A review of complaints before the United Nations special committees dealing with indigenous peoples includes a dossier of indictment, that reveals there is a brazen assault worldwide, and pertinently here in South Africa, on the quest of foundational peoples to be restored to their rightful place in society.

In our local narrative, this condition flows from an unstable faultline in the historical compromise resulting from the negotiations process where, for expediency, a horsetrade was effected in which the disenfranchisement and historical trauma of Khoi and San descendants was excised from the final agreement upon which the new South African state was constructed.

This crude Faustian deal resulted in deep unhappiness which has spurred an intense Khoi and San resurgence movement prior, during and after the



negotiations process that gave rise to the post-Apartheid state. From its early and uncertain beginnings, this movement has gathered strong traction resulting in more than 200 events and engagements over the last 30 years.

It was the correction of this deep injustice that underwrote the collective position unanimously adopted by more than 300 leaders of South Africa's indigenous Khoi and San peoples from across the country when they gathered on 28 February 2010. They met in the main hall at Oude Molen, Cape Town, under full cultural protocol and ceremony.

This event was to mark the quinquennial (500th year) anniversary of the Battle of Gorinhaiqua, the group who defeated the feared Portuguese militarist, Francisco de Almeida, and his assault troops at Salt River in the most successful anti-colonial battle in our country.

The gathering at Oude Molen called into existence Die KhoiSan Noodsein or the KhoiSan Emergency Action Committee, which organised a march in September 2010 of thousands of Khoi and San descendants. They marched from many points across the Cape Town Central Business District, culminating in a mass rally in front of Parliament. What is significant about these events, captured for posterity on film, in

pictures and in print, is that numerous demands have been made to the South African government and related local and international institutions over a long time.

Deeply embedded in the core demands by indigenous leaders and cultural activists was that central to the recognition, restitution and restoration of Khoi and San descendants is the clarion call that sentinel heritage points be properly protected and made accessible to descendants of the foundational peoples. The narratives and events with which the sites are associated must be authentically manifest and integrated into the contemporary cultural life of the first nation descendants and the broader society within which they exist.

What then has this history of engaging official institutions to do with reclaiming agency?

My contention is that the discovery and exercise of cultural agency is a necessary condition for self-determination, a universally held principle that is premised on the sovereignty of indigenous people acting in their own interest. This “taking of agency” and the refusal to be railroaded in a bureaucratic process is what drove the First Nations Collective to directly engage the legal owner of the River Club. The club is located on territory ►►

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that is significant to the Cape Peninsula Khoi and San peoples, particularly the Gorinhaiqua, who were the historical custodians of the area.

The collective, which is organic, growing and evolving every day, currently comprises the Gorinhaiqua Cultural Council; the Gorachoqua Tribal Council; two Cochoqua councils; the Griqua Royal House; the National and the Western Cape Khoi and San Councils; the Overberg Heritage Council; the KhoiSan Labour Forum and the Foundation Nation Restoration.

Included among our ranks are the vast majority of the resurgent Khoi and San leaders and structures in the Western Cape who for more than three decades has been at the coalface of the struggle for recognition, restitution and restoration for Khoi and San descendants.

This direct contact with the developer, based on indigenous cultural agency, has produced a world-class development proposal. This is where the First Nations Collective will be



empowered to permanently collate and curate our heritage, meaningfully practice our craft and culture, and tell our own stories while also training our own people.

Through this project our voice will have a platform to resonate across South Africa, and reach indigenous communities across the world.

The significance of this area and the adjoining Oude Molen site has been the subject of more than two and a half decades of intense engagement between ourselves and senior state officials.

This includes premiers of the Western Cape government, provincial ministers of several Western Cape government administrations, mayors of the City of Cape Town, the chief land claims commissioners, several ministers of the national government and even the apex of governance, the presidency.

All our efforts in this regard have fallen on deaf ears and we have been

subjected to ridicule or bludgeoned with the arrogant silence of invisibility, which means being treated as having never spoken and not worthy of being heard.

Having been trivialised and bludgeoned into invisibility we elected to directly approach Jody Aufrichtig, representing the registered owners, about the redevelopment proposal. We have found the developer, Liesbeeck Leisure Trust, open and empathetic to our concerns, which were placed on the table in a frank exchange of views.

We believe that the developer has grasped the intense pain that has been associated with the bludgeoning of our narrative. As such, this developer, unlike any other government, corporate or social entities with which we have engaged, has made a firm commitment to ensure that the footprint of the Khoi and San's history of resistance, and its modern-day resurgence, is incorporated into the development plan.



Through this engagement the First Nations Collective has secured an area in the centre of this development, which is of great cultural significance to us. This part of the redevelopment site has been set aside for building a fully fledged heritage centre, a functional indigenous garden and cultural praxis site, a world-first international indigenous media and communication centre, as well as an amphitheatre where the best of Khoi and San art, culture and music can be showcased.

The developer has also committed to cleaning up and indigenising the ecology of the area and to ensuring that the spiritual and cultural symbols of the Khoi and the San find resonance within the proposed development plan.

We are aware that there will be detractors, including those who believe that indigenous people stand diametrically opposed to development, relegated to an anthropoid fetishised state where they roam perpetually in antiquity without the tools to navigate the modern world.

Our position is that indigenous peoples are not the perpetual children that the colonist and colonial mentality would have us be. On the contrary, it is our view that such paternalistic notions must themselves be put to the sword.

Our view is that working with the developers seizes victory from the jaws of defeat, prevents perpetual dithering and provides a strong launch pad from which other more intense struggles for self-determination can be fought. Through this action, the long fight for recognition, restitution and restoration is given a space from which generational trauma can be healed through resilient and sustainable cultural and heritage praxis, authoring a song of hope in the valley of despair that threatens to rob us and our progeny of a future.

We have chosen this pathway because South Africa today is a society that is an uneasy, even volatile, mix of hope and despair, idealism and stoic jadedness, accurately described

as “an unstable tinderbox” by the late Professor Ben Turok during an interview with the author in late 2016.

This sober assessment by Turok came from his reflection on the state of South African society and, more pertinently, the deepening contradictions in the African National Congress which was then and still remains the ruling party.

What is clearly reflected within this condition is a set of actively contesting realities manifested in elements such as expressiveness and censorship; cultural solidarity and cultural balkanisation; constitutional guarantees and rights curtailment; civil activism and state repression; peace and militarism; egalitarian ideals and brazen social deviancy; corruption and watch-dogism; collective aspiration and individual crude accumulation.

Thus, the current state of affairs in South Africa can at best be described as schizophrenic and at worse as an unstable tinderbox that, left without mitigation or intervention, could explode.

This state of affairs has prompted several prominent South African social scientists to express alarm at the rapid social and political erosion, calling for urgent interventions, including the retooling of the security services, the drafting and implementation of a new social compact, and a review of legislation that could imperil transparency in social, commercial and political relations within the young democracy. It has also produced a visible calcification of positions, and polarisation of a country that less than two and a half decades ago held out the greatest promise of any post-conflict society.

Visible manifestations of the deepening tension in South African society can be seen in both the intensity and regularity of social uprisings, deterioration of industrial relations and growing discontent of the people who have grown tired of what Langston

Hughes aptly described as “a dream deferred”.

Within this context, more than a quarter of a century since the dawn of democracy, the issue of the National Question, upon which the resurgence is premised, can no longer be ignored. It presents our country with one of the most pertinent contemporary challenges – one that we ignore at our peril. This specific question is one that has to be addressed if we are to truly realise any form of sustainable social cohesion and nationhood.

In our context the National Question cannot be understood or addressed outside of the national liberation struggle, which resulted from the natural quest of our peoples to free themselves from the shackles of colonialism and Apartheid, which gave rise to dispossession, genocide and racist and political repression.

The earliest challenge to the tyranny of our oppression in this country occurred in the late 15th century with skirmishes in Saldanha Bay and Mossel Bay. This was followed in the early 16th century with one of the major defeats of colonial onslaught in Africa, when Khoi warriors defeated the feared Portuguese militarist, Francisco de Almeida, on the shores of present day Salt River on 28 February 1510.

Since that time there have been numerous wars of resistance waged by the Khoi and San against both the British and the Dutch colonial forces, which reflected their refusal to accept subjugation.

This is critical to understanding our current day dilemmas in this country, for much of that resistance history is not even reflected in our national narrative and is not carried in our history books. I refer to this history, much of which the majority of our country’s people do not know, because to correct the wrongs of the past and redress this injustice we need to know what occurred as a result of these first wars of resistance. >>

What cannot be denied is that the Khoi and the San were the first to be dispossessed of their lands and subjected to a methodical physical and cultural genocide, which included widespread displacement and land theft, banning and destruction of Khoi and San culture, including the original languages and cultural structures, and the classification of the first indigenous peoples and the slaves who endured brutal servitude in the colony as coloureds. This meant they had no access to social cohesion, no claim to the land of their forebears, and could not assert the right to self-determination.

This is important today because 26 years after the end of Apartheid and the dawn of democracy we still have not addressed those original injustices. We now have limited legislative recognition of Khoi and San leadership, but this legislation does not address how to rectify what occurred to the vast majority of the people who, correctly, can assert their right to be called the descendants of the first peoples. They bore the first and most devastating blows of colonialism and their dehumanisation was further entrenched by Apartheid and, tragically, persisted into the post-Apartheid era.

Today, 26 years after Apartheid, descendants of the first people have been denied access to jobs, employment opportunities, land restitution, economic development rights and cultural rights, including the right to linguistic recognition, which are granted to other cultural groups and other peoples who comprise the South African nation.

Then there is the question of legislation aimed at rectifying the historical exclusion and injustice that the oppressed in this country had to endure. It is this rising tide of anger, resulting from the destructive and disturbing legacies of colonialism and the failure of the ruling party, and which has its roots in the movement for national liberation, which must deal with the National Question.



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The broad issue to which the National Question in any particular context speaks is built around the inalienable international right of peoples or nations to self-determination. In trying to come to grips with what exactly this question entails, it helps to draw on the wisdom of Guinea Bissau liberation leader and thinker, Amilcar Cabral.

Cabral provided significant insight into this question during his presentation, *History as a Weapon*, at Syracuse University in New York in February 1970, which was part of the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture series.

In that presentation Cabral stated: “Just as happens with the flower in a plant, in culture there lies the capacity (or the responsibility) for forming and fertilizing the seedling which will assure the continuity of history, at the same time assuring the prospects for evolution and progress of the society in question. Thus it is understood that imperialist domination, by denying the historical development of the dominated people, necessarily also denies their cultural development.”

Cabral further stated: “The study of the history of national liberation struggles shows that generally these struggles are preceded by an increase in expression of culture, consolidated progressively into a successful or

unsuccessful attempt to affirm the cultural personality of the dominated people, as a means of negating the oppressor culture.

“Whatever may be the conditions of a people’s political and social factors in practicing this domination, it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement. In our opinion, the foundation for national liberation rests in the inalienable right of every people to have their own history whatever formulations may be adopted at the level of international law.”

Cabral said: “A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture.”

It is in the spirit of giving shape and form to Cabral’s words that there is now an intense stirring on the ground across the country, and specifically in the Western Cape, in theatres of struggle such as the River Club, where those who have been at the coalface of the struggle must either capitulate to endless deferment of our people’s dreams or take bold steps to secure spaces of anchorage from which we can intensify our struggle.

In the instance of the River Club it is our belief that we have removed ourselves from the evil gridlock of government paper pushing, paternalistic arrogance of the landed gentry descended from those who usurped our custodial lands and the real and present danger of local and worldwide economic catastrophe. Through this act of agency, we cut our own path of destiny through a minefield. **NA**